

LESSONS WE YOUNG DOCTORS LEARNED FROM A DISHONEST SURGEON

By Paul M. Riley MD: FACS

Interns and surgical residents at Butterworth Hospital in Grand Rapids, Michigan, where I did my surgical training, did not realize how much they learned from Dr. "Clinton" until after they finished their training. He was one of the first surgeons I met when I started my Internship on July 1, 1961. Over the next five years I came to know him quite well. During this time, he frequently wanted me to assist him with his surgical cases. He also wanted me to completely care for his patients while they were in the Hospital. We learned mostly from Dr. Clinton's mistakes and his deceptions. In spite of his shortcomings, he seemed always to come out "smelling like a rose"; even when it looked like he was in deep trouble. He had a huge superiority complex. He wore expensive tailor made suits. He demanded respect from everybody! He thought he could talk his way out of any difficulty! He felt that he was above the law! He had a charming bedside manner! He convinced most of his patients that he was the best surgeon in the world! He would never shake hands with patients, explaining that he did not want to spread any germs!

I was told that Dr. Clinton was born in the late 1800s on a large plantation "Down South" and that he was raised by black servants including a "wet nurse". His uncles, "Zeke" and "Zack", according to him, fought for the South in the Civil War. He spoke with a deep, cultured, Southern accent. He was a graduate of Vanderbilt University School of Medicine.

He told us that he earned extra money, while he was in College and Medical School, by selling large family Bibles. He outsold all his competitors! He would take train trips carrying his supply of Bibles. He would take the slow local train that stopped at every small town. He told about a typical sale. "As the train pulled into the station, I looked up the hill and saw a farmer plowing his field with a team of horses. The train would be stopped for just fifteen minutes. I took three Bibles and went up to the farmhouse and knocked on the door. The farmer's wife greeted me. I said: "I just talked to your husband out there in the field. He said he thought your family needed one of these Bibles. He said it was the best bargain he had ever seen; but I must let you make the final decision." The lady took a cookie jar off the shelf and counted out ten dollars and took the Bible. I then went out to the field and met the farmer. 'Sir I just talked to your wife. She says your family needs one of these Bibles, but you, being the man of the house, must decide." The farmer wiped the sweat and dirt off of his hands; then pulled out his wallet and gave me the money. I gave him the Bible. As the train whistled the five minute warning I hurried down to the train. My timing had to be perfect! I looked back to see the farmer walking, slowly, back to the house, carrying the Bible. He went into the house and then came out running down the hill towards me. As I heard the air brakes on the train being released I ran up to the ticket booth. 'Sir', I said, 'I just sold this Bible to that farmer. See, he is bringing me the money. He won't get here in time! Just give me ten dollars from the till and give him this Bible'. The agent was glad to comply. As the train pulled out of the station, I saw the agent leave the

ticket booth and run up the hill and hand the angry farmer his third Bible! Usually I could sell at least two Bibles at every whistle stop. But I had to be careful and never show my face again in those places!”

Dr. Clinton loved to take doctors and prominent friends bird hunting. He had seven pure bred “Pointer Dogs” that were poorly trained. He tried to control them with seven different whistles. When he wanted to call the dogs he would blow all seven whistles at once. This thoroughly confused the dogs. The dogs ended up chasing all the game birds away. The hunters would spend the rest of the day trying to round up all the dogs. The birds remained safe!

I was told that Dr. Clinton had been a terrible driver since he bought his first car. People recognized his car, while it was still far away, and took evasive measures. He frequently wanted to take surgery residents, in his car, to Surgical Meetings in Detroit, Ann Arbor, or Chicago. New doctors would gladly accept the offer, only to return as nervous wrecks. He often drove on the wrong side of the road. Oncoming cars would swerve into ditches and cornfields to avoid head on collisions. All the policemen knew him well! He hated traffic lights. He would cut through parking lots and filling stations to avoid stopping at red lights. He was involved in frequent minor collisions. When he had a collision he would run to the hospital or to the nearest home and drag any person he could find to the scene of the accident saying: “Come, I want you to witness an accident. Tell the police what I tell you.”

Dr. J. told me about the time he was riding with Dr. Clinton. He became very scared when the doctor went through two red lights without stopping. Finally the car was stopped by the police. When the policeman approached, Dr. Clinton burst into tears. “Please give me a ticket. I deserve it. I should not be thinking about the poor woman who just died. I was up all night trying to save her life. She neglected her health working two jobs trying to support her completely disabled husband and four small children.” He went on to give details of his imaginary patient’s suffering and how hard he tried to save her life. The policeman was also in tears. He was so captivated by the story that he left without writing a ticket. As soon as the policeman left, Dr. Clinton burst out laughing and gloated over how, again, he had talked his way out of trouble!

A few days later, Dr. J. and Dr. Clinton were in the Hospital Lobby waiting for the elevator when a middle aged lady rushed up and addressed Dr. Clinton. “Dr. Clinton, you don’t remember me, but you saved my life twelve years ago! “Of course I remember you. How would I ever forget you?” Dr. Clinton replied. “If any other doctor treated you, you would have died! You were the best patient I ever had. Not a day goes by that I don’t think of you! You won’t believe it, but just a minute ago, I was telling this young doctor how I saved your life. Wasn’t I doctor? All these young doctors have learned a lot from you!” He continued to talk rapidly until the elevator

arrived. The lady was unable to say another word! "Sorry, I have a patient on the operating table"; Dr. Clinton said as he jumped on the elevator. He then turned to Dr. J. and said; "I don't remember that d---- woman." After a long pause he again addressed Dr. J. "You have got to keep talking, Doctor, you have got to keep talking; because if you let them ask you just one question, they have got you!"

Dr. M. told about the time he rode to Detroit with Dr. Clinton. The roads were covered with ice but Dr. Clinton went speeding down the two lane road. He was passing cars on curves and in "No Passing" areas. Then, on a long straight stretch of road, he started passing a line of cars. Even though a car was coming straight at him, Dr. Clinton did not pull back into his lane. Dr. M. yelled a warning that was completely ignored. At the last moment the oncoming car swerved off the road. It crashed through a barbed wire fence, slid across a cow pasture and ended up spinning like a top on a frozen pond. Dr. Clinton showed no reaction to the near head on collision. Finally he turned to Dr. M. and said: "You know, I hate a coward", then he changed the subject. Dr. M. rode with another doctor back to Grand Rapids. He was still shaking when he got back home. He preferred to be a live coward rather than a dead hero!

I found out that, in 1936, Dr. Clinton's car was involved in a high speed head on collision. A woman was killed. Dr. Clinton lost his right eye and the right side of his face was ripped open exposing his cheek bone and eye socket. He told the police that a peach pit had punctured his tire and caused the accident. (When I once remarked about Dr. Clinton's bad driving, I was told: "It is nothing compared to how bad he drove before his accident"!) When Dr. Clinton arrived at the Hospital, after his accident, he was still unconscious. He was stabilized, his face was wrapped and he was left in a quiet area. A few minutes later his bed was empty. No one could find him. Then he was discovered in the suturing room, standing in front of a mirror, repairing his face. He would not let anyone else, in Grand Rapids, touch his face!

A retired doctor, who was an intern in 1936, assigned to Dr. Clinton, told what a time he had with the doctor. Dr. Clinton refused treatment from any of the local surgeons. He insisted that he go to Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. He rented a Pullman rail car. He also insisted that he take his favorite double mattress and be carried on it. The side of the Pullman had to be removed in order to get Dr. Clinton and his mattress into the train car. The side had to be removed again when the train reached Rochester, Minnesota!

Dr. Clinton spent two years at Mayo Clinic getting his face rebuilt. While recovering, he made friends with all the surgeons. He called them all by their first names! He was an observer at almost all the major operations performed at Mayo Clinic. He became friends with visiting surgeons from all over the world. He told them many imaginary stories about his surgical successes. In turn he was invited to visit famous surgical clinics all around the world. If you

mentioned Grand Rapids to any foreign surgeons, they would ask about Dr. Clinton. To them he was the best surgeon in the Midwest. His self praise had them convinced! Somehow, he was written up in glowing terms in the Newspapers in the foreign cities he was visiting. When Doctors in Grand Rapids asked him how he became so famous he would reply; "Before I tell these doctors about my surgical successes, I first make sure there are no eye witnesses present!" Whenever he would return home from spending time with world famous surgeons he would report on his visits at the next surgical meeting at our Hospital. He had not only become friends with these famous doctors; he had also got to know their families as well. He often stayed in their homes!

The doctors in Grand Rapids were surprised when Dr. Clinton resumed his surgical practice after his terrible accident. He was operating with just one eye. He was very busy during World War II when most of the surgeons were drafted. Because of his injuries, Dr. Clinton was not drafted. His assistants would almost faint when they saw his right eye watching them while he was working deep in the patient's abdomen. They did not know that he had a glass eye!

Dr. Clinton would not admit that he ever did anything wrong. He always blamed his house staff or nurses if his patients had any complications. He decided to write a research paper on his "superior" scrubbing technique. He would do cultures on the hands of his assistants before and after they scrubbed. No matter how hard they scrubbed, their Petri dishes showed massive bacterial growth. But Dr. Clinton's dish never showed any growth. Then a sharp eyed intern noticed that Dr. Clinton was not even touching the agar gel in his Petri dish. He was only pretending to do so. He was also touching their cultures with non sterile objects when he thought they were not watching. So the assistants then would only pretend to touch their own dishes, then they would touch the bottom of their shoes. Then they would touch Dr. Clinton's dish when he was not looking. Then Dr. Clinton's Petri dishes showed massive bacterial growth! Dr. Clinton then lost all interest in his research project.

The surgery schedule at Butterworth Hospital had most of the prime time spots filled with Dr. Clinton's patients. But the day before the surgery, Dr. Clinton would call the OR supervisor and tell her that his patient had a family emergency, or other problems; so the surgery would be cancelled and another of his patient would be scheduled in that spot on the schedule. The doctor would freely admit to us that he was scheduling fictitious patients, weeks ahead of time, so he could fill the spots with real patients at the last minute! Finally the rules were changed so that he could no longer switch his patients on the Surgery Schedule.

A former intern told how he had to help Dr. Clinton repair a laceration on his horse. Then he had to assist him when he did a bilateral mastectomy on his old dog. He then ordered the young doctor to bring a bag of human blood from the Hospital lab and give it to the dog. That killed the dog. Dr. Clinton was very sad until he realized, that, if the dog was human it would have been 120 years old!

One would have to call Dr. Clinton a racist. If a black maid was cleaning the locker room, Dr. Clinton would walk out of the bathroom from the shower completely naked. He would completely ignore the maid as if she was an animal. But if the maid was white he would wait in the bathroom until the lady left. He would never let a white lady see him if he was not fully dressed in a coat and tie with every hair in place! He had nothing good to say to us about Black People. They were lazy and untrustworthy! They had to be supervised and ruled with a firm hand! Trying to train them to be leaders was like trying to train a Belgian Coach horse to run in the Kentucky Derby! Jokes were told that the Clintons still had a large Plantation complete with slaves down in Alabama!

Dr. Clinton liked to invite new doctors and their wives to elaborate dinners at his country home. Mrs. Clinton, who he called "Shug", with the help of her black servants, would serve a delicious Southern meal fit for a king. We were surprised at the loyalty of these servants. Sometimes, the young couples would arrive only to find that Dr. Clinton had forgotten to tell "Shug" about the invitation. She would have to round up her off duty servants and cook and serve a quick meal. These servants were so happy to do this extra work for the Clintons. They refused to take any extra pay for their overtime service. They counted it a privilege to serve such distinguished people. They kept the house spotless. Money and valuables were left all over the house. These were always picked up and put back in their places. The servants ran the estate completely in silence. The Clintons carried on their activities as if no one else was present in the house. They trusted their servants completely. They never lost even a penny. When the Clintons went "Down South" on vacation, they left servants in charge of their property, their horses, and their pets. They even left them with keys to their house plus money to pay for food and expenses. The servants didn't slack off even though their "Boss" was away! Yet the doctor would never publicly say anything good about black people. Visitors were surprised to see how he completely ignored his servants. He treated them as if they were pieces of furniture or part of the landscape.

Later we found out that Dr. Clinton made sure that his servants got the very best medical care. He even provided housing and a pension for them if they became disabled. He even supported their disabled parents and grandparents. The black people, who knew them, thought the Clintons were the greatest people alive. They would bow and scrape in front of them! They were eager to do all they could to help the Clintons. In their eyes, the Dr. Clinton ranked high above the other doctors who were not Racists! This was very puzzling to the rest of us.

I became friends with a Drug Detail Agent who used to supply free drugs for indigent patients at my Hospital Free Surgery Clinic. He told me that he had wondered why all the other Agents avoided Dr. Clinton. He thought he saw a golden opportunity so he went to Dr. Clinton office.

He was surprised that he was warmly welcomed. Dr. Clinton seemed very eager to learn about the new drugs. To thank the Agent, Dr. Clinton offered him a thorough physical exam for free. He had Olga, his long time office girl, lab technician, X-ray technician, and scrub "nurse" all in one, do lab work and upper GI and other X-rays. (Olga's whole life was concerned with pleasing her boss. She believed everything he said! She was on surgical call day and night. She had no social life. She almost worshipped her boss!) Dr. Clinton then sat down with the agent, showed him his X-rays and told him that he had multiple surgical problems and Olga was already on the phone scheduling him for several operations. As soon as Dr. Clinton left the room, the agent slipped out the back door and ran for his life!

After he was finally convinced that early ambulation of patients decreased post operative complication, Dr. Clinton really went overboard on the issue. If his patients had any complications, he would blame the nurses for waiting too long to get the patient up. The nurses still refused to drag unconscious or dying patients out of bed. After a 90 year old patient had extensive cancer surgery that no elderly patient could tolerate, the patient remained comatose. Sensing that the end was near, the family gathered in the patient's room. Members of the patient's family kept calling Dr. Clinton saying the patient was getting worse. Dr. Clinton kept telling the family that the patient was getting worse because the nurses refused to get him out of bed. Finally, Dr. Clinton told the nurses that he would come personally and walk the patient! He came and dragged the patient out of bed. The patient showed no response and slid to the floor. Dr. Clinton finally dragged him to a recliner and propped him up with pillows. The patient sat there glassy eyed, completely unresponsive. The doctor combed the patient's hair, inserted the patient's false teeth, then put his eyeglasses on him. Turning to the family he said: "There now, somebody give him a newspaper." Then the doctor left. In a short time the patient was dead. The doctor then told the family that the nurses were responsible for the death!

Any patient who came to Dr. Clinton with unexplained abdominal pain would have Barium swallow X-ray done by Olga in the doctor's office. The patient was then shown a beautiful film showing a hiatus hernia and surgery was then scheduled. In the operating room the X-ray would be displayed on the viewing box. The surgical field would be so small and deep in the abdomen that the assistant could only guess what was being done. Several doctors finally realized that the same X-ray was being used for all the patients. The patient's name was never on the film!

My friend, Denny Donnell, also interned and took one year of surgery at Butterworth Hospital. We both had graduated from Greenville College. He admitted a young male patient for Dr. Clinton. He was puzzled because the patient's was having extremely severe abdominal pain, but physical findings were minimal. Dr. Clinton operated on him. Nothing was found at surgery but

Dr. Clinton said he found intra-abdominal lymph nodes “the size of pecans, not Florida pecans, but Georgia pecans”! Post operative the patient became psychotic. His pain meds made him worse. Finally the young man’s mother approached Dr. Donnell and said; “Could my son have Acute Intermittent Porphyria. His cousin had several abdominal surgeries before it was diagnosed.” The appropriate blood and urine tests then confirmed the diagnosis and the patient recovered when the proper medicine was started. This is a rare inherited metabolic disorder that causes bouts of severe abdominal pain. It is rarely diagnosed before the patient has had several surgeries.

Before he started an operation, Dr. Clinton would inspect the pile of instruments and remove the curved clamps and scissors. When asked why he did this he would reply; “Doctor, did you ever try to shoot a pheasant with a shotgun that had a curved barrel”? Olga would always bring spools of imported cotton thread that she would then cut to the right length and sterilize. It had to be Egyptian cotton. These were the only sutures and ties that Dr. Clinton would use. Olga kept her doctor in line. He never asked her for instruments. She knew what instrument to hand to him. She seldom spoke. She didn’t care if he wanted a different instrument. She would stop him if he was about to harm the patient. She knew all the operations by heart. As her Boss got older, he relied more and more on Olga to keep him out of trouble. I think many interns and residents learned more surgery from Olga than they learned from her “Boss”. At first, Dr. Clinton seldom sent a surgical specimen to Pathology. He said he had enough experience that he could make the tissue diagnosis by just looking at the specimen. If he was afraid that he would be censored for removing a normal appendix, uterus or gallbladder he would take the specimen with him when he left the operating room. He would say the family wanted to see it. The specimen was never seen again. The surgical dictation was always in the present tense. It always described the organs as being terribly diseased. If the surgeon nicked the spleen, liver or bowel during the surgery he dictated that the intern did the damage by pulling too hard on the retractor!

Dr. Clinton’s patients adored him! He knew how to gain their confidence. Even when he was guilty of malpractice, he had such a good bedside manner that his patients would still praise him. Even if the patients, he had harmed, went to another doctor with surgical complications, they would beg the new doctor not to contact Dr. Clinton. They didn’t want to hurt his feelings! Even when one of his patients was dying from surgical complications, the patient would die praising Dr. Clinton. His patients were convinced that they had the very best surgeon.

Dr. Joseph Mann, son of the famous pathologist at Mayo Clinic, was hired by Butterworth Hospital. He helped implement strict laws to control errant doctors. A Tissue Committee was created. This Committee reviewed every surgical specimen. All tissue and objects removed at

surgery had to be sent to pathology! Dr. Clinton said the tissue committee had taken all the fun out of surgery. He was called on the carpet several times for performing inappropriate surgery. He finally realized that he could no longer talk his way out of trouble and began to toe the line. But he would still exaggerate and tell lies if he thought it helped improve his image and reputation. He finally realized that he could fool some of his patients, but could no longer fool the Operating Room Committee or the Tissue Committee. More and more patients were educating themselves about medical problems and were questioning Dr. Clinton's decisions. They started suing Dr. Clinton so he decided to retire when he was well past 80 years of age.

The doctors who trained at Butterworth Hospital were appalled at Dr. Clinton's overt dishonesty. He seemed to believe his own lies! They vowed not to imitate any of his unprofessional behavior. Dr. Clinton's behavior convinced them that honesty was the best policy. Someday they would also be patients! When these Doctors started their medical practices, they did all they could to weed out the dishonest doctors like Dr. Clinton who were giving their profession a bad name. But Dr. Clinton did demonstrate that a surgeon must first gain a patient's trust and have a good bedside manner. Then the patient will usually forgive the doctor if he made an honest mistake.

Dr. Clinton ended an era where doctors could do as they please, be a law unto themselves, and fool the public. Unfortunately these relatively few dishonest doctors caused widespread public distrust that resulted in the large number of Malpractice Lawsuits that plague the medical profession today. I think these dishonest doctors are partly responsible for today's high cost of medical care. Doctors now have to practice defensive medicine and order many expensive tests that are unnecessary. Doctors have to retire earlier since financially they are unable to slow down or work part time. The high cost of Medical Care, in turn, is making the Public unhappy with the Medical profession.

When I taught medical students I told them the best way to learn is from mistakes, but it should be the mistakes of others. However, if they do make a mistake they should admit it and learn from it. The mistake must never be repeated! Then they must try to keep others from making that same mistake!

Yes, by observing Dr. Clinton's behavior, we learned a lot!

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