

Accuracy in the OR Is Nothing to Sneeze At



dentist, like a juggler, is an individual whose right hand should always know what his left hand is doing. That's why dentists take exceptionally good care of their hands. Male dentists, of course, have to learn this the hard way because in their younger days, they attempted to play baseball or handball with other clueless males.

The learning curve is steep, but with enough finger injuries, even the most unreconstructed eventually concede there are some things they should eschew.

In spite of the fact the first and best do-it-yourself kit consists of your own pair of hands, most dentists learn to keep their fingers away from power saws. If they ever have to pound a nail, it becomes prudent to hold the hammer with both hands. Exercising every precaution and opting for an early retirement, most of us find our hands professionally functional as long as we need them.

There are exceptions. My little finger on my right hand — a finger that has lain dormant for the last eight decades except to extend itself in a proper fashion at tea parties — has suddenly become painful to flex. As usual with ailments that occur almost every day in the Golden Years, I ignored the discomfort until I found myself seeking compassion from an orthopedic surgeon.



"You've got a 'trigger finger,'" he opined cheerfully. Having heard all the protests from innocents who have never triggered a gun in their lives, he went on to explain in one-syllable words for my benefit the problems of the flexor muscle as it passes through a series of sheaths. These have somehow become clogged with the detritus of a misspent life and it now impedes the smooth passage of the muscle inside them. I wept softly into a small pillowcase I brought along for that purpose.

I wanted to ask why this particular maverick finger has gone rogue and not one or more of the other nine. But he remained busy explaining that he would perform a "trigger release" operation, whereupon he vanished. His nurse, who had been lurking in the shadows leafing through a Victoria's Secret catalogue, emerged to hand me a ream of papers to be signed and an appointment card for the surgery. She wanted a complete blood workup and an EKG. It's best not to argue, I'm thinking, grateful it's

Continued on Page 914

Exercising every precaution and opting for an early retirement, most of us find our hands professionally functional as long as we need them.

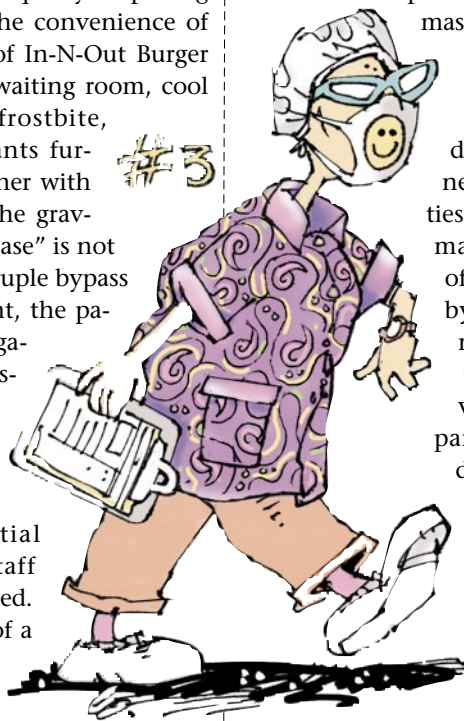
Overkill is not a word I like to associate with a surgery center, but this seemed a little excessive for a piece-of-cake job on my little finger.

Continued from Page 914

not a major bowel obstruction.

I fronted up at the Same Day Surgery Center, an imposing edifice designed to alleviate the high cost of extended hospitalization. An equally imposing fee was offered for the convenience of speed, rivaling that of In-N-Out Burger outlets. The austere waiting room, cool enough to induce frostbite, was full; the occupants furtively eyed one another with loathing. Although the gravity of my “trigger release” is not on a par with a quadruple bypass or a kidney transplant, the paperwork and interrogations by staff were essentially the same.

“Fill out these forms, both sides, sign here, and here, and here, and initial here, and here,” Staff Person No. 1 instructed. She gave me a copy of a waiver absolving the entire staff and their families of any liability. “Just a formality,” she smiled with a hint of a wink. “Are you allergic to anything?” Dutifully noting my negative response on her clipboard, she left. Staff Person No. 2 appeared, professional in green scrubs, booties, and a small likeness of Jerry Garcia tattooed on one ankle. “Are you allergic to anything?” she demanded. I am about to mention I had already denied the allergy thing, but state no again. Satisfied, she said, “That’ll be \$100 co-payment.” As she absconded with my money, leaving a visible vapor of Jean Naté in her wake,



Staff Person No. 3 materialized, commanding me to follow her. Her ensemble was topped with a paisley blouse and stylishly contrasted blue cotton scrub pants. She wore a face mask with an embossed smiley face.

We entered a large room with a dozen or more gurneys occupied by parties in various states of malaise. A minimum of privacy is provided by movable ceiling-mounted curtains that leave only a view of the occupant’s varicosities on down. The place resembles a Toyota assembly line where the unwell are ushered in one end, to be slid out the other, swathed in bandages, and stamped **FINISHED**.

SP No. 3 (played by actress Marjorie Main) entered my cubicle and wheezed, “Are you allergic to anything?” These people are *really* concerned about allergies apparently, but somehow the word has yet to filter down through the entire organization. “OK,” she rasped cheerfully, “take off everything and put on this gown. Place your clothes in the plastic bag — socks, shoes, wristwatch, and any prosthetic devices you may have.”

“Everything?” I try not to appear alarmed. Overkill is not a word I like to

associate with a surgery center, but this seemed a little excessive for a piece-of-cake job on my little finger. “I’m just having a correction here on my little finger,” I protested, wiggling that digit to verify my status.

“No,” she countered, “you’re scheduled for arthroscopy on your right knee. Says right here on your chart.”

“My knee is fine, it’s my little finger!”

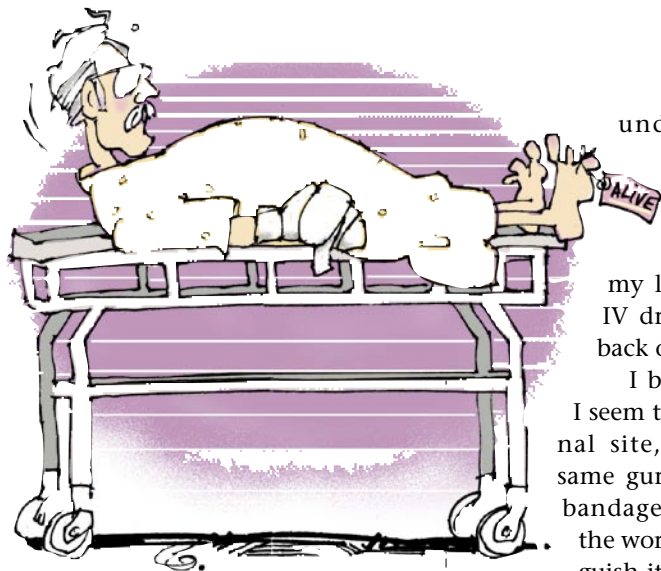
“You sure?”

“Absolutely!” I thought it’s more than allergies they should be worried about as she scuttled off to consult with upper management.

SP No. 4 entered the arena, accompanied by SP No. 3 and a gaggle of interested spectators. “Not right knee arthroscopy?” she queried in a tone that suggested I was faking the whole thing.

Several skeptics exposed my right knee and prodded it excessively. I feared I was about to be Miranda-ized. I flexed my finger painfully in her direction. Reluctantly, she plucked a red felt-tip marker from her embonpoint and drew a wavy line the length of the finger, putting a little star at each end. “There!” she declared, resigned. “By the way, are you allergic to anything?”

I disrobed quickly, trying in vain to secure the strings in the back of the gown, slipped on my attractive blue booties and arced awkwardly onto the gurney. I placed my designated finger out in plain sight in case there was trouble ahead. Another female, who may or may not have been SP No. 4, arrived to announce the anesthesiologist was on his way and should be here within a fortnight. She covered me with



a warm blanket, neglecting to ask me about my allergies to wool or polyester.

"Hi, I'm Dr. Wu, your anesthesiologist," he proclaimed, inscrutable behind his face mask. "You allergic to anything? Right knee arthroscopy," he muttered, checking his chart.

Oh, God! "No, no, no!" I bleated, waving my red-marked finger vigorously. He looked at me blankly, huddled briefly with either SP Nos. 1, 2 or 3 for confirmation and trotted off to have the whole OR setup dismantled to conform to the lesser task. Obviously he was disappointed. It was like being all set for a full-crown prep and find it's just a buccal pit.

Finally, I was in the operating room with the big lights and the banks of blinking LED lights in a choice of M&M's colors. A vocal contingent of salaried people in full OR gear milled about, exchanging light-hearted banter. Latex hands slipped in under my blanket and whisked my gown right off of me, reminiscent of the showman who yanks the tablecloth out from

under the plates and glasses without disrupting anything. I am now stark-buck naked, including my little finger. I feel the IV drip butterflyed on the back of my hand.

I blinked once or twice. I seem to be back in my original site, recumbent on the same gurney. My hand had a bandage on it, lacking only the word EVERLAST to distinguish it from a boxing glove.

I experienced no drowsiness or hangover. My gown was mysteriously back in place, causing me to wonder if I might be another victim of a cruel hoax commonly played on old people.

One of the battalion of staff people hovered bedside. "OK," she smiled, "hop off and I'll help you get dressed."

"That's it, I'm finished?" Disbelief vied with astonishment. She nodded, expertly shoe-horning me into my shorts with no discernable embarrassment except mine.

"Call your doctor for a postop appointment in a week." She hurried off like Lewis Carroll's rabbit. Got to keep the assembly line moving.

So that is the state of medicine today. On my way out, I told the admitting nurse (played by Cloris Leachman), "My knee feels 100 percent better. It's a miracle!"

"Sign this release form," she said without expression, "and indicate with a check mark whether you are allergic to anything." Her eyes darted between my hand and the chart. Would you tell

her? Neither would I, but I *would* like the name of that anesthesia in case it ever becomes OTC.

CDA