

Scared to death but ridiculously-normal

(If you're looking for something cycling-related, there's nothing to see here, move along. Just an overly-lengthy piece about a guy's fear of needles and having blood drawn, along with mortality issues and a bit of guilt.)

Confession time. Yesterday was my first "voluntary" trip to a doctor in... could be 35 years. Seriously. Yes, I've had a few life insurance physicals, and yes, there was that broken wrist (actually the base of the thumb) a couple years ago. But aside from that, well, let's just say I've done my best to avoid encounters with doctors. It's not that I have problems with hospitals or doctors per se. I don't look at Kaiser and think "This place gives me bad memories, 'cuz it's where my dad spent the last days of his life 24 years ago." I don't live in denial, thinking if I see a doctor, they're going to discover something terribly wrong with me that I'd rather not know about.

It's far simpler than that.

I have a pathological fear of needles and having blood drawn. Seriously. I am tough as nails on virtually any sort of pain (for the most part, broken bones & teeth have never bothered me, and when the 'doc would insist that I take something like Vicodin to "stay ahead of the pain"... well I tried it... once... didn't like the way it made me feel, and didn't need it anyway), so this isn't about pain. It's about needles, and watching or thinking about blood bubbling up in a tube. It's about the blood drawer looking at my arms and saying "You've got great veins, this is going to be easy!" and I get nervous and manage to collapse them so they have to keep stabbing at me over and over as I get white as a sheet. And when you associate that with anything having to do with a doctor visit.. well, you can see my problem.

This even caused me a fair amount of guilt; when my father was dying (of an unusual blood cancer that hit a lot of people who worked in the newspaper biz at the time, probably having to do with a deadly combo of benzene, lead and photo chemicals), he needed blood, which many family members and friends generously provided. But not me.

But I'm 56 years old now, and in that full-circle sort of thing, the same age as my father when he died. A rude reminder of mortality, and when you talk about metaphorically seeing death staring you in the mirror, you start noticing things like that mole... has it changed? You notice that you're not as fast on the climbs anymore... is it really just a breathing issue?

So I made an appointment with a generic Doctor at Kaiser, ostensibly to discuss just my breathing issues (likely exercise-induced asthma), but when it becomes quickly apparent that I'm a guy with no (medical) past, it's almost as if I can hear the door to the exam room locking, aware of my desire to flee, so the good Doctor can order up all manner of blood tests, lung x-rays and whatever else.

And so it was that I went from there to the place they collect your blood, and it was there that I nervously sat down in the chair, and started to think about things in a fatalistic manner, as in, it's only a matter of time and this will be over. I noticed two vials and hoped that both weren't going to be used; I imagined blood being coaxed from my veins one drip at a time. But I gamely looked to the side, hoped for the best, felt the slightest of pin pricks, and then did the unthinkable. I forced myself to relax. And amazingly, it was as if I could feel the release of tension and my veins willingly open up and easily fill both vials in record time.

8 minutes later... I kid you not... I get my first email from Kaiser, letting me know the automated part of my blood tests are available. All ridiculously normal. Not happy about the hematocrit level of 44; do I need to microdose EPO to get it up to 50 (max legal limit for cycling before they accuse you of doping) or what? Yes, I can laugh about that.

The second panel came in today, all the cholesterol stuff, liver tests, quite a few things that, if readings are "bad", point to things that could be trouble. And again, every single one of them ridiculously normal. Blood sugar levels, cholesterol, the two biggies, perfectly fine. No indications whatsoever of anything like my father died from, and yes, even though I realize it was almost certainly environmental, you still wonder.

There's more in store for me down the road; internal plumbing inspections for one (I shouldn't have joked about cyclists being obsessive and "anal" about heart rates, as that provided a nice lead-in to a discussion about colonoscopies), and the previously-mentioned x-ray of my lungs to rule out any damage from 2nd-hand exposure to cigarette smoke as a little kid. But the rest of it doesn't scare me. And the next blood test doesn't scare me nearly so much as this last one did. --Mike--