



What's happening in your waiting room?

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When we were newly minted doctors, a classmate of mine, I will call him *Dr B.*, began his family practice in a southern Ontario city. Many years later at a class reunion he recounted a very memorable waiting room event. But first let's look at that often-ignored staging area where the medical and healing process begins and ask ourselves the question, What goes on in the waiting room?

Nobody thinks much about the waiting room, including those who sit and wait. But in fact a waiting room often contains an amazing concentration of the full spectrum of human emotion, ranging from bone-numbing boredom to acute anxiety. Occasionally there can be transformative moments or eccentricities, and sometimes the totally unexpected can happen. Here are some observations.

A family physician acquaintance of mine knew the musical preference of most of his patients. He had an extensive play list that he used as background music in his waiting room. He would program the play list specifically for the patients coming to the office that day. He had a very happy patient population who rarely complained if they had to wait.

I sat in a waiting room recently for more than an hour and noticed that people do get tired of playing with their smartphones. There were some vintage issues of *National Geographic* and *Reader's Digest* sitting on a central table in the middle of the waiting room. After a while several people got up and had a look at the magazines. One of the readers recommended an article to a neighbour. A conversation began and in jig time one found out the other lived on Isle Madame and a connection was made. Then someone else in the waiting room asked about someone she knew from Isle Madame. The silent defences fell like dominoes. Soon everyone in the waiting room was talking. I had just witnessed a small monumental waiting room moment—the unintended consequences of having magazines in waiting rooms.

My wife and I visited the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn, for a History of Medicine conference. We marveled at the aesthetic touches that popped up everywhere. In one building when we got off the elevator we were greeted by a glass sculpture. Backlit by natural light, it radiated beauty and mystery. We discovered that each floor had something equally special. Contemplating these amazing works of art was transcendent.

Medical lobbies and waiting rooms aren't always serendipitous wonders. I had a patient who played the trumpet in an orchestra. He used to bring musical scores

with him to look over while he waited for his appointment. He performed them out loud: "Ta da da DA DA." Now, if a conductor did this at a rehearsal it would be completely acceptable but in a doctor's office, it is weird. The waiting room became anxious. Blood pressure levels went up. Eventually the receptionist solved the problem. When she saw Mr T. coming with a sheaf of papers, she would quickly put him in an examination room where his muffled "ta das" went for the most part unnoticed except when I opened the door. TA DA!

But, this last example pales in comparison to what happened in Dr B.'s waiting room.

Art of professional wrestling

Dr B.'s reunion story historically corresponded to the tail end of Canadian professional wrestling's golden age. To set the stage for Dr B.'s story, I will share some lingering memories of those days. Whipper Billy Watson¹ was the good-guy wrestler in a group of competent professional wrestlers who were mostly designated bad guys. He was approaching the end of his stellar 55-year career. Whipper's name came from the Irish Whip, a wrestling move that he made famous. I remember watching him with my father on a small grainy black-and-white television. Whipper's opponent was the loutish, college-educated former Edmonton Eskimos tackle Gene Kiniski.² At the end of a brutal but beautifully orchestrated bout he whipped Kiniski across the ring into the ropes. Kiniski bounced off the ropes and landed in the centre of the ring where Whipper gracefully picked Kiniski up over his head as if he were the lighter half of a figure skating duo and threw him crashing to the mat. He allowed the dazed Kiniski to wobble onto his feet and whipped him again, this time into one of the corners of the ring, which Kiniski hit with a thud. Quick as a flash Whipper moved in and delivered some punishing body blows. Then with surgical precision he applied his famous sleeper hold, upended his groggy opponent, and slammed him to the mat. It was game over for Kiniski and a very satisfactory conclusion to the match, I might add.

Late in his own career Kiniski explained that he much preferred wrestling to football, because in wrestling "you know where the blows are coming from."³

Then there was the electrical engineer, teetotaler, and vegetarian Killer Kowalski, a giant of a man who famously ripped off part of Yukon Eric's cauliflower ear in a misjudged knee drop.⁴ The fans were outraged by this travesty and flocked to subsequent matches

to see if Killer would get what was coming to him. Sometimes Killer did get his comeuppance and sometimes he didn't, but after a while the outrage dwindled and so did attendance. Whereupon, it was rumoured that Killer and Yukon Eric got together over a cup of tea and some pierogies and discussed sacrificing another branch of Yukon's cauliflower ear to improve their declining revenue.

I later found out that Whipper, Kiniski, and Killer had long professional careers with lucrative side ventures. One of the 3 made a fortune and became a philanthropist raising millions of dollars for handicapped children. One of them died in his mid 70s, 2 of them made it into their 80s before "the big dirt nap,"* and none of them developed dementia or Parkinson disease.

Dr B.

In medical school Dr B. was competent and quiet, as well as a keen observer with an appreciation of incongruity. And, he was from Newfoundland. When he started practice, these compelling attributes percolated through his new community and in short order he had a large flourishing practice, including a number of Newfoundlanders. One of these Newfoundlanders was a professional wrestler. Now, you might have observed in your own practice the interesting phenomenon that occurred next. In the space of several months, by some sort of word-of-mouth arithmetic progression, Dr B. had a whole busload of professional wrestlers in his practice.

During the reunion talk, Dr B. matter-of-factly stated, "There are some aspects of your practice that take on a life of their own, like my influx of professional wrestlers, and before you know it you become the 'wrestler doctor.' And by the way, you might expect professional wrestlers would present with strangely rearranged noses, fractures, dislocations, hematomas, and soft tissue injuries. This was rarely the case. It was usually, 'Doc, what about this pimple?'"

*"The big dirt nap" is a phrase coined by Ron Scott, personal communication.

Dr B's waiting room

One day Dr B.'s receptionist told him that the second patient for the afternoon was an 85-year-old woman who was transferring into the practice and that she would have her medical records with her. The first patient that afternoon was the Avalon Anvil. (I have changed the made-up ring names to fictitious made-up ring names.) The Avalon Anvil wanted to know what he could do about a rash between his bulging pectoral muscles.

Dr B. listened, examined, proposed an acceptable management plan, and walked out to the waiting room with the Avalon Anvil to get his next patient. There, with her hands neatly folded over her medical records, was the 85-year-old transfer patient. Sitting next to her was the Avalon Anvil's arch rival, Mad Dog Mingo. Quick as a wink Mad Dog did a flip to the middle of the waiting room floor, grabbed the Anvil in a claw hold, and did a floor drop. The Anvil let out a bloodcurdling roar and in an amazing feat of choreography the combined 500 lb of human flesh reversed positions. Then the Anvil jumped to his feet, helped Mad Dog up, and left the waiting room.

Dr B., who had witnessed the performance, went to introduce himself to the new patient.

She had disappeared.

Mad Dog Mingo put his arm around Dr B. and said, "Don't worry, Doc. I think she went for a second opinion." 🌿

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Acknowledgment

I thank **Dr Gary Benson**, **Lindsay Cameron Wilson**, and **Deborah Banks** for their valuable input on this article.

Competing interests

None declared

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