The Medical Roundup

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(Register and Tribune Syndicate, 1960)

What Can Happen In Unnecessary Operation

I am constantly getting letters from people who say, "An x-ray man says he thinks I have a duodenal ulcer. What kind of operation should I have? Would it be safe for me to put off the operation for a while?" How stupid it would be for a man to have an operation if he wasn't suffering, or if what little pain or discomfort he had could be relieved by diet or a little vacation. Many persons write to say, "The x-ray man found I have a little diaphragmatic hernia. It doesn't bother me and I never knew I had it, but a surgeon wants to operate right away, before it gets bigger." Many a woman writes, "an x-ray man just found accidentally that I have a gallstone; it never bothered me, or hurt me, and I have a perfect digestion, but a surgeon feels that the gallbladder should come right out."

Dr. Alvarez

All I know is that I would never think of being operated on for a purely x-ray diagnosis like that. Perhaps I am wrong, but after 55 years of studying diseases, I don't like operations on persons who are not ill. There are a few exceptions, as when a man with gallstones or a rupture or a big prostate gland is going on a trip into the wilds somewhere, far from a good surgeon. He might be wise to get fixed up before he goes. But when a man lives in a big city, there is little sense in his rushing into an operation he does not need. I have seen too many hundreds of persons who not only did not get better after an ill-advised operation – they got worse. A small percentage of them died. I could tell of some of these persons who never felt well again.

I thought of this the other day when in came a man, now a bit of a wreck, whose story gives us a perfect example of what can happen when a well-meaning and kindly surgeon operates when he does not have to; and then, in his desperate efforts to work a cure, does more work than was absolutely needed. In this case the surgeon was such a close friend of the patient that he made no charge for his work. Unfortunately, he did not realize that what was really wrong was his friend was that the fellow was slipping into a mild mental crack-up, much like the ones which had harassed his alcoholic father and his insane mother. The patient told me that his family tendency to nervous troubles was so strong that his two brothers were drunkards, and his sister was a "goof."

What had happened was that when the man got some harmless heartburn, he was x-rayed and a small diaphragmatic hernia was found. His surgeon-friend immediately operated, and made the mistake of not only repairing the hernia but trying to cure a small duodenal ulcer that he found. The shock of all this threw the poor patient into such a bad depression that he could no longer work. He had to retire on a small pension, and in his unhappiness he took to the bottle. It is now very doubtful if he will ever work again.

Another man who came in recently told me a somewhat similar story. He is a business man of 55 who travels a great deal for his company. Because he has always been a great worrier, he decided one day that he ought to forestall any acute trouble with his appendix, perhaps on a train, by having it removed. Several surgeons in succession advised him to leave well enough alone, but eventually a surgeon-friend of his obliged him. But then trouble began because the man, for years a chain-smoker, coughed so hard he broke his wound open. Back he went to the operating-room for a closure of the wound. Again he coughed until he tore the wound open. By now, he was so near death the surgeon did not dare operate anymore. Later, when he did repair the harm, the man got a clot in his thigh which went up into his lung and nearly killed him. By this time he had aged greatly, and was finding it hard to go back to his business.

Obviously, these are two unusually bad results, of a type not often seen; the only reason I mention them here is to show that such things can happen when a man rushes into an operation that he did not need.

Dangers of Driving After Taking a Drug

We all know how dangerous it is to drive a car after having taken a few drinks. Not enough people know how dangerous it can be for some persons to drive a car after having taken a tranquilizing drug. A woman was just telling me the trouble she is having with her husband who gets "goofy" when he takes a new drug which his doctor has given him to quiet him when he gets excitable. The other day, if she hadn't grabbed the wheel, they would have gone head on into an oncoming truck. Now I read that studies by doctors and state police have shown that a dose of a certain tranquilizer plus two martinis can give a man the equivalent of a drunk. If he drives then he can have a terrible accident.

Dr. Alvarez' booklet on vision may be obtained by sending 25 cents and a large, stamped, self-addressed envelope with your request to Dr. Walter C. Alvarez, Dept. MMT, The Register and Tribune Syndicate, Box 957, Des Moines 4, Iowa.

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