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Addiction Medicine & Psychiatry



High, Dry and Shaky on an Overseas Flight

On a recent flight to Europe I had just settled down in my seat when I heard the announcement: “If there is a doctor on board, please contact a flight attendant.”

When I arrived at the galley, the flight attendant pointed to a bulkhead seat where a physician was already attending a tremulous, distressed-looking woman. Since everything seemed to be under control, I turned to go back to my seat, but the physician said: “Please stay for a moment. I zinc ve need to haf a consultation.”

We stepped into the galley and I drew the curtain to give us privacy. The physician was a boyish-faced, eager looking type with a European accent. He seemed nervous. (Probably a recent med-school graduate, I speculated, who is not too sure of his diagnosis.) “Zis shaky lady has an attack of paroxysmal auricular tachycardia,” the doctor explained pedantically. “And since I am a pediatrician, you are probably better qualified zan I am to take zis case.”

I smiled. When I countered with “Well, I am a psychiatrist,” the doctor’s face fell, and the flight attendant, rolling her eyes, turned her attention back to her serving cart. So, in the spirit of the Hippocratic oath – “at least, do no harm” – the pediatrician and I agreed that he would take the case since in his daily practice, he is closer to clinical, hands-on medicine than I am. I returned to my seat.

A few minutes later the flight attendant came to fetch me. “We need you again,” she sighed, “but I think it’s really the doctor who needs your help.” The doctor, it turned out, had meanwhile changed his diagnosis. Zis shaky lady has an ‘acute anxiety attack.’” Looking at me hopefully, he explained, “zis makes it more in your line. You probably see zis kind of case every day, yes?”

I decided to take a quick look and get a brief medical history. It turned out that the shaky lady was a chronic alcoholic on her way back home to Europe. While visiting her friends in California, they confronted her about her drinking problem. (“Zey are verry health conscious,” she explained.) As a result, she attended several Alcoholics Anonymous meetings and stopped drinking. A couple of days later when she got nervous and couldn’t sleep, a California “doc-in-the-box” physician put her on Valium. (As for her alcoholism . . . well, he didn’t ask – and she didn’t tell.) Thus, unbeknownst to both the patient and the doctor, the Valium was, in effect, treating her alcoholic withdrawal symptoms.

Unfortunately, in order to arrive back in Europe “clean and sober,” and be able to proudly tell her family that she had finally licked her problem, she had stopped taking the Valium four days before boarding this flight.

“So,” I summarized for my medical colleague: “What we have here is a ‘dry alcoholic’ who is in early Valium withdrawal. What she now needs is 10 mgs of Valium intravenously, and some Valium tablets to carry her until she gets to her hometown physician.” And, I added cavalierly, “since we are both still on the case, perhaps you would like to give the injection?”

The doctor’s face lit up. “Oh, yes, I can do zat verry vell. I can tredd a vein the size of a hair. I inject babies all ze time, you know.” As he was loading the syringe, the flight attendant resumed filling passengers’ orders for Bloody Mary’s, gin and tonics, etc.

As I settled back in my seat, I realized that at that very moment, about 200 plus people on this airplane were doing varying degrees of alcohol/drug use, abuse or addiction. (Some, suffering from a fear of flying, were, no doubt, taking prescribed sedative hypnotic medications like Valium, maybe along with

some alcohol, to control their potential panic.) But for the shaky lady – the one passenger who surfaced as a diagnosed “patient” – Valium was just what the doctors ordered. With proper treatment back home, this would be her last chemical high. For the rest of the flight, I was not summoned again.

Later, as I was deplaning, three flight attendants gave me sincere thank-you’s instead of the usual frozen smile “by, by’s.” They were almost as grateful as the shaky lady who gave me a shaky “thumbs-up.” Most appreciative of all was the pediatrician. Acting cool, he gave me a Hippocratic high-five and said “Good by, Herr Doktor.”

As we shook hands, I couldn’t help but think of the debarkation scene from the Hollywood movie “Ship of Fools” based on Katherine Anne Porter’s novel. Had Shakespeare been on board of our flight, he would probably have said “Even at 40 thousand feet, all the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely . . . patients.” Or did he say players? Ah, whatever.

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