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ILLNESS / HEALTHCARE

I now sit on a soft adjustable hospital bed in an air-conditioned room with two other patient/inmates. My path to this room has been slow and painful. It started some time before the actual moment of literally being knocked off my feet by the illness. On December 7th, 2017, the exact date marking the seventh year of my incarceration, I was made to face the illness that had been lurking in my system for maybe a month. Oddly, on December 6th, I had felt better than I had for some time prior, and even odder, the night of the seventh, it snowed in Huntsville, TX, where I was then assigned at the Byrd Unit. The first snow in that region for many years. The freezing cold seemed appropriate to mark the occasion since my back felt as if all the vertebrae were frozen together. I had pain shooting down both my legs which crippled me to the point of near immobility.

I had been having night sweats and felt a little achy prior to that night, but had thought little of it since I had just turned fiftyone and took it as a sign of aging perhaps. From that moment on things continued to get worse. I was unable to walk to the chowhall to eat, much less sit up at the table. Even the restroom at the other end of the dorm began to seem impossibly too far to travel, but the need outweighed the struggle. I had never felt this sort of pain in those parts of my body ever in my life. I was hoping it would pass but it did not and I put in a request to go to the infirmary. I try to avoid going to the infirmary for two reasons. The first is that we are charged \$100 for a visit, which seems miniscule when in a free society but is a small fortune to an inmate that does not, or rarely receives money and does not get paid to work in prison. As of today, only Texas and Georgia do not pay the inmates for their labor performed while incarcerated, and Texas charges for medical care in most cases. The second reason I am weary of the infirmary is that

for the money you may not get the treatment you need. The level of care usually degrades the further you are away from the main prison hospital in Galveston, TX. The main hospital actually gives the finest of care available to both inmate and free citizen, but as I mentioned, getting there from the prison units can sometimes take a near death experience, as in my case.

So I get the pass (called a "lay-in") in Texas prison to see the P.A. (Physicians Assistant). When it is finally my turn to see him, after waiting hours behind others in line, I sit down and tell him my symptoms as he pecks away at his computer, only once looking at me for a mere second. There was no exam of any kind, no looking at those things you would think one would during a visit to a medical professional. Instead, a prescription of ibuprophen (the standard cure all it seems), and a date for a back X-ray. Then a stern goodbye. Next, I stiffly made my way out and back to the dorm which I resided, having to brace myself against the walls to prevent a fall. The next few days were spent lying on my back on sweaty sheets. All my daily routines were too painful to even think about. I managed to bathe in the sink and make it to the bathroom in that was about forty feet away from my bunk. That was all I could manage and it was becoming harder. Living in a dorm allowed those around me to witness my suffering. There were some who reached out to help in small but noble ways. Like bringing me water, offering me food and even giving me a better mattress that one of my friends had acquired from medical, to maybe ease my pain. Then there were other inmates whom were not only mere observers but seemed to relish seeing me defenseless and not my normal self. Though I had no real enemies to be weary of it was still unsettling to be so vulnerable in such an open prison environment as a dormitory is designed. On a cell block, where there are two man cells, I'd have more security since the doors are only opened at certain times

...throughout the day. But living in a dorm allows a bit more freedom of movement while sacrificing the sense of privacy sometimes found when your cellie is gone elsewhere. When healthy I prefer the dorm life.

Life was feeling grim and foreboding as I lay ill and not sensing any sort of real help available. I was called back to be X-rayed, hoping to maybe see something that was causing severe sciatic nerve pain and back pain. Then back to my cubicle where I just lay and try to figure another route to get help. I felt like the P.A. just brushed me off, but did feel a little hope when I got the X-ray done. A couple more days passed and I was losing weight and my upper left side of my chest began to swell and redden. My muscles in my shoulder began to atrophy. I made a hot water bottle out of an empty shampoo bottle that I would let sit in my electric hotpot to heat. It would help some with the chill spells I began having, which would shake my whole body and expend what little strength I had. The only other option I thought to get help was to go directly to the ranking staff and plea for help. Rather, I needed them to come to me and see me in my condition since the infirmary was not offering much more help. I needed real care that could maybe be found at a free-world hospital. I had another inmate that worked around the staff in the front office tell them to come see me and that he has been witness to my deteriorating condition. That was a mistake. Yes, they did come to visit me in my cubicle but mostly just to scrutinize me and quiz me as to "what happened"....was it a fight?..Did I fall?..Did I hurt myself while outside on the recreation yard? None of these were questions of real concern, but inquiries of means to place guilt upon me for something I had done wrong. In doing so they could write me a disciplinary case, putting the blame on me for whatever ails me, and washing , , ,

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[REDACTED]

....their hands clean of any possible wrongdoing. Any sort of injury that an inmate suffers, by whatever manner it may have happened, be it a true accident or bad luck, or a bad choice, though made without malice, the inmate will be given a disciplinary case that includes some sort of punishment like loss of priveleges to loss of an upcoming chance at parole. Many injuries go unreported because of this policy used to cover the states ass for any possible liability. So the "Rank", a Captain, a Lieutenant, a Major and a Sergeant all approach my cubicle to see this sick man they were told of. All women, three black, one white. All full of the pride they seem to cherish being in such authority over others. Self-importance and smugness seem to be part of their starched uniforms. They began firing questions at me in rapid succession trying to get me to admit to some sort of accident or misstep. I was sick, that was all that is to it, and that did not seem humanly possible to them, as if I were not human, only a name and a number to be reckoned with as part of their job. I told them of my inability to even walk to the chowhall and I have already been to medical and they said they have done all they can do. They seen I was pale and sickly looking and was weak. They said they would check with medical and then let me know something later. I never heard back from that little committee that only came to interogate me. I later learned from the inmate who summoned them that he heard them say there was nothing wrong with me. As if I were faking. That night was the coldest and darkest of my life in prison. I wished for death, trapped in my body and in an unmerciful prison. I was becoming delirious and my thoughts were filled with hopelessness. The next day arrived and I got another pass to go to the infirmary to find out the results of the back X-ray. I really did not care to go back there since it was too draining to move any more than needed. The only reason I did get dressed and work my way . . .

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[REDACTED]

...to the infirmary is that I did not want to get written up for not appearing at my appointment. I left everything there in my cubicle as if I were returning shortly. Little did I know as I left out that I was leaving through that door for the last time. No farewell to those who I call friend and leaving all my belongings which make life somewhat more comfortable, really more like tolerable, while doing the years assigned to me behind bars.

Once in the infirmary, I sensed something different. The nurses who first attend you were somehow kinder and approachable that day, unlike my last visit where everything was hurried and I seemed to be a mere inconvenience. I seemed to be the only inmate in the area at the time. The Nurse commented on my color, being very pale and having dark rings around my eyes from no real sleep, among other things. She took my vitals and my temperature was 103°. I do not recall the bloodpressure, but she took me into a sideroom and hooked up an EKG and the numbers were alarming enough to her to get the attention of the actual Doctor who happened to be there that day. I had never actually met this man, though I had seen him in the hallway on occasion. He was an Asian man of small stature, yet seemed large in a way that only confidence and wisdom can create. He examined my eyes and throat, then told the Nurse to call an ambulance. I was stripped of my prison garb and put in a hospital gown as I waited for the ambulance to arrive from the local hospital. They arrived and I was then shackled at the feet and cuffed at the hands along with the little black plastic box which is placed between the cuffs to stiffen the chain and attach the chain that connects the cuffs to the shackles. Much overkill for a man who can hardly walk, but it is policy and I can see the logic, somewhat. Two armed female guards escorted me to the hospital, both of which I considered kind and to be in the wrong profession. Once at the...

...hospital I was questioned and had some blood drawn. I then awaited to be admitted upstairs to a room, where I thought I'd be uncuffed, maybe just chained to the bed. When taken upstairs they kept me cuffed and shackled and chained all with the black box on the cuffs to restrict most movement of my wrist. This is how I was to remain for my stay. The cuffs were already biting into my wrists enough to cause bruising, which was not hard to do in my condition. The bloodwork revealed that my platelet level was ten, which meant I would most likely bleed out if I were to suffer a cut. There was another inmate in the hospital room with me. He too was tightly cuffed and shackled as was I. He was a frail eightyone year old. That was real overkill that I did not see the logic in. For extra security, there were sensors along the outer seam of the mattress which would set off an alarm if I sat on the edge of the bed. So I could only remain in the center which I had no problem doing since sitting up was becoming harder to do. There was a loud boisterous prison guard stationed outside our door. He seemed to remain at full volume all night trying to impress and woo all the freeworld nurse staff. He seemed to be a patron at a sports bar, unconcerned with anything but shining the light on his charm and humor to the ladies. The hospital is under contract with the state to provide certain healthcare services to the local prisons, which are about six of them I am aware of, in just that area. There are about 108 prisons strewn across Texas. My wrists became tender and the skin bruised enough for them to remove the cuffs and use plastic zip ties. All this being nearly hog-tied while ill in a hospital bed is because the hospital is not considered secure enough to unhandcuff their prison patients, in fear of an attempted escape. These contracts made with this local hospital brings in large sums of money from the state. Maybe millions, and I would think that ...

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...they would take some of it and invest in securing their facility so there would be no need to keep their patients restrained like Houdini. After two days of drawing blood and trying different antibiotics out on me they decided I was more than they could handle so they decided to ambulance me 120 miles away to the prison hospital in Galveston. Once again the guard insist that they put the steel handcuffs back on my already bruised and nearly bleeding wrist, which I argue against, but without success. The ambulance ride is long and bumpy causing every nerve that is agitated to sting. When I was uncuffed for a minute to put the steel cuffs on at the hospital, I realised that I could not lift my left arm at all. It was as if it fell asleep and I hoped it was the case. When I did get to Galveston Hospital, and I was fully untethered, the realization that my left arm was still dead found me. But that was just part of the stuff that ailed me. I was immediately put in ICU. The nurses tended to me with much skill and care, more than I had ever experienced in any hospital.

The nurses who I knew as Jasmine and Holly worked with professional vigor as I was bathed with chemical wipes and given a fresh comfortable bed, all without restraints binding and hindering my every move. A secure floor of the prison hospital, as are all the floors of the hospital there. The staff were ready to answer any question about my condition. I was septic, and had been for some time. The Doctor said I was nearing organ failure, and had I been a weaker man it would have killed me. I also had a broken clavicle which the infection nested in and got out of control. I also was full of bloodclots. The Doctors at Galveston saved my life, after a radical surgery to remove bone and months of powerful antibiotics, I began to recover. I was also given treatment with a hyperbaric chamber, which helped speed my recovery. The infection had abcessed up and down my spine, causing partial paralysis. I went from stretcher

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to a wheelchair ,to walking upright after about five months in both hospital and time at a medical facility which was air conditioned,as opposed to the normal uncooled prisons here.The scar left on my neck looks violent where they removed the infected bone(sternoclavicular joint) and now the end of my left collar bone floats back and forth just below the skin,but I survived and can walk without any device.The only bitterness I have is against those who ignored my plea for help when I was truly ill.I do also understand the position of some of the staff who deal with many who fake illness for the chance to sit in the air-conditioned infirmary,and to have some attention paid to them,maybe scoring some sort of product they could sell if they are an indigent inmate.Eyedrops,laxitives,lotions and sleeping aids like benedril seem to be the award for wasting the nurses time when they are not really ill, just needy in different ways.As for the \$100 co-pay I was concerned about, I was never charged since I was ambulated from the unit.That makes me think that the decision to charge some and not others may actually be a way to weed out those who are not in real need of help.I do not know,but the treatment I have received since has been in the hundreds of thousands of dollars,guessing from my awareness of medical expense imposed upon others.I have another surgery scheduled to possibly help the nerve damage in my left arm,which is still weak and I can not lift above my head,which is an improvement from the onset of my illness.Overall,I am thankful,and have seen the side of health-care in here that I had no idea existed.I was given some of the newest of tests on some of the best technology in the profession.Yes,UTMB healthcare is a medical school that offers treatment to state prisoners,and we are blessed to given such.Some say they are just expermenting on us like lab rats.But I disagree.All medicine and treatments begin this way and the accumulated knowledge leads to great leaps in medicine.That's my .2¢...