

Over Yonder

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“How’s it going Mr. Charlie?” I asked.

“Well ol’ Arthur is lickin’ me today” he replied with a grimace.

I responded with “Both knees or just one?” but I already knew the answer.

“Both, they stove up, but at least I always know when it is going to rain!” he chuckled..

They say that going into medicine is like learning a second language. If that is the case then practicing medicine in the South is like being trilingual. The colloquialisms in the South create a form of communication that makes the doctor-patient conversation sound more like a trip to the kitchen or the farm than a medical encounter. I was lucky enough that I was born right into it; just one generation away from a farming family. So rather than learning this vernacular on the fly, I learned it from the source. For those practicing in the South, if you become proficient in this language your patients will love you. If not, they will just say, *“Bless your Heart”*.

“We are going to review your medical history. Have you ever been diagnosed with any medical problems?” I inquired.

“Why yes actually. I have a little bit of high blood. I get the sugars from time to time. I have been told I have heart dropsy too. Oh yeah and I got the vapours whenever I think about my babies. But other than that I am as fit as a fiddle!” she exclaimed.

This foreign language can sometimes be straightforward. *“High blood”* equals high blood pressure and *“the sugars”* equals diabetes. That’s simple enough. But as always if you turn back

time and find someone using older phrases you might be lost. What is “*heart dropsy*” you might ask? Nothing more than congestive heart failure. And the “*vapours*”? She has some anxiety. Going back to that first diagnosis, sometimes even the simpler sounding phrases may be deceiving. We established that “*high blood*” equals high blood pressure, so it would make sense that “*low blood*” equals low blood pressure. But alas we would be mistaken, because “*low blood*” means anemia. And “*bad blood*”? Well that does not mean your patient and their cousin are fighting. That means your patient needs some penicillin because they have syphilis.

“How you feeling today, Ms. Daisy?” I said.

“I’ve come down with something Doc. I’m so sick I look like the north end of a southbound pig.” she mumbled.

You can never forget that we southerners like hyperbole. Just look at all the ways to tell someone you are sick. “*I’m indisposed*”, “*I’m feeling puny*”, “*feeling under the weather*”, “*I’m sicker than a dog*”, “*I’m going down hill fast*”, or my personal favorite, “*I’d have to feel better to die!*”. All these sayings refer to general illness. So what about more specific maladies. You’re constipated? “*You’re all locked up*”. Stomach swollen? “*You’re poned up*”. Diarrhea? “*Your stomach is all tore up*”. With most of these, given a body system and a short phrase you would be able to guess what the other was complaining of. However, as we have already seen, that's not always true.

“Mrs. Mary, I heard that your daughter is getting married soon. Congratulations!” I exclaimed.

“Thank you sir. But I’m not too sure how I feel about it. That boy acts like he only got one oar in the water.” she remarked.

In case you are wondering Mrs. Mary just told us that she thinks her soon to be son-in-law ain’t that smart. As you might have realized, the medical lingo of the South likes to use phrases that paint a picture. Other phrases you might hear, *“if brains were leather he wouldn't have enough to saddle a flea”*, or *“he’s not the sharpest knife in the drawer”*. You might have even heard some variations of these phrases too. Replace flea with the local favorite arthropod or instead of talking about knives maybe you are mentioning tools. So just like there is more than one way to skin a cat, in the South there are a lot of different ways to insult someone's intelligence.

One side note here, that I think is very important to cover, in practice and in life when you hear many of these phrases the speaker could be referring to someone who has an intellectual disability.. While as a compassionate person, it makes me uncomfortable to hear phrases that could be hurtful used to describe someone with a disability, I still feel it is important to record them so we can learn and understand what patients are telling us.

“Have you been using anything for that itch?” I said inquisitively.

I have. I’ve been spreading Jewel Weed on it. And it works like a charm!” she said excitedly.

Apart from being a linguist we southern physicians also have to be botanists. Sometimes seeing a patient is more akin to not getting lost on one of William Bartram's trails. The more famous herbal remedies are covered in medical school. Think St. John's wort and ginseng. However this is just scratching the surface of the multiple remedies you might find in your local herbal apothecary i.e. granny's cabinet. From the aforementioned Jewel Weed, which your patient will place on any itch, to Yellow root, that they might use on anything from a sour stomach to an oral ulcer, to the plant with the most fun name to say, Sassafras, there is endless bounds to what our patient's in the deep South might add to their medicine list.

"So what exactly do you use it for?" I stated with a confused expression on my face.

"Well it prevents colds, and detoxifies, and decreases stress, and helps your heart, and helps your arthritis, and fixes my sciatica, and ..."

You wouldn't think you would ever run into the Bubba of elderberry but some country folk will tell you that they have more uses for this plant than Bubba does for shrimp. Now depending on who you ask you will get a few different answers to whether this stuff really works. But Momma said to try it, and you don't have to be from the South to know what Momma says do, you do.

"Rains a comin' Johnny. I can feel it" he said with confidence.

You might remember earlier in this composition our fine patient mentioned that his knees worked better than any meteorologist, even Al Roker. One thing you learn quickly as a physician

in the South is that arthritis equals weather radar. A tale as old as time, the old men sit on the porch, rocking their chairs, with joints that creak more than the old wood floors beneath them, and tell everybody who passes by the latest weather predictions based on the amount of pain and stiffness they are feeling that day. Now as an unseasoned commentator you might think, “Even a broken clock is right twice a day, surely they don’t really know when it is going to rain based on their arthritis.” But don’t tell that to Ms. Shirley. She has been using her husband’s left elbow as the predictor for when to hang the laundry to dry for over 40 years. Oh yeah and by the way, Johnny got soaked on his way home that day.

“What’s all this?” I blurted.

“I just wanted to show you how appreciated you are so I made you this quilt. I even had our prayer shawl disciple group pray over it. And also, my world famous pound cake! It’s an old family recipe you know!” she said as if she was singing.

For anyone who has taken a medical board, you all know the question. “Granny brings in a dozen chocolate chip cookies, what do you do? Do you eat the cookies? Tell her it is against the rules?...” Obviously whoever wrote that question spent some time in the South because they know that baked goods are constantly being brought in to the local office. What they likely also know is baked goods aren’t the only gifts that show up at your door. Crocheted blankets? Check. Grandmother’s quilt? Check. Dozen fresh eggs and a sampling of local produce? Check. I have even heard stories of a few pints of white lightning being offered as gifts. You see Southerners love to give just as much as grandmothers love to bake. It’s almost a guarantee that by the time

you retire you will have sampled so many old family recipes and world famous pound cakes that you might think you can bake one yourself. Spoiler alert. We probably can't.

You see, being a physician in the South is an experience like no other. Maybe I am biased because I was born, raised, and will likely die in the same corner of small town Alabama, but being a part of these communities and taking care of these people creates a life worth doing. We might wear a few extra hats down here; Linguist, botanist, taste-tester, story teller, and the list goes on. But I will always cherish these roles. Honestly, I couldn't see myself being anywhere else. So if you are ever trying to find me or my office, the only directions you will ever have to hear is "*just head on over yonder*".