



Volume 13
Issue 1
2018

Downsizing

Gordon Sun

I rolled into the first floor pulmonary clinic for my monthly visit. “I’m here to see the docs,” I said, as soon as Dana, the older nurse with the 1960’s bob cut, girly pink scrubs, and too much lipstick, appeared behind the registration window. I had to look up at her from my wheelchair. “Nine-thirty appointment.”

“Johnny O’Brien, right?” Dana confirmed.

“Yep, that’s me.”

“You have your card?”

I gestured with a clenched right hand toward my chest, where I was wearing a yellow lanyard and badge holder with my hospital identification card tucked inside. “Sorry, can’t get it out,” I began. “My hand is acting up...” I felt my face redden just a touch.

“That’s okay, I can see your ID from here,” Dana said. She typed something into her computer. “The reason for your visit?”

“The trach. I come here every month.”

“So a tracheostomy check?”

“Yep.”

“Any pain or shortness of breath?”

“No, just a little sore throat.”

“Fever?”

“Nope.”

“Any falls recently?”

“Nope.”

“What medications are you taking?”

“You always ask that,” I said. This question’s always so annoying. “Don’t you have that on file, on your fancy computers and whatnot? Can’t remember all their damn names. Something for spasms...”

“That’s fine, I’ll look it up later,” she interrupted. “Allergies?”

“Nope.”

“Alright, I think that’s it,” the nurse said, typing some more. “Just stay here in our waiting room until you get called.”

“Fine, fine. Thanks.” I prodded the joystick by my right hand, spinning the wheelchair around. Half of the waiting room was roped off with yellow construction tape and piled high with wooden slabs, but I managed to find an open area in another corner of the room. I settled in next to a cheap-looking, fake potted plant covered in a thick film of sawdust and powered down the chair. With my left hand, which fortunately was not clenching up this morning, I punched in a couple of keys on the large phone sitting on my lap and started up the music streaming service. Simon and Garfunkel began flowing through my earbuds.

A few minutes later, a young, tanned guy with slicked-back black hair rolled over to my corner in a powered wheelchair covered in colorful bumper

stickers, accompanied by an even younger blond kid wearing navy blue scrubs. “*Hola, señor,*” the guy in the wheelchair said, smiling. He was wearing a grey hoodie and sweatpants stamped with a local college logo. I wondered briefly if he used to be an athlete. The kid in the scrubs sat down in an empty plastic chair and began toying with his phone, ignoring us.

“Hey, there,” I replied, taking out my earbuds. “Don’t think I’ve seen you around before.”

Wheelchair guy was examining my chair. He also had a trach tube, but his had a red cap on it. I used a green device on mine, what the speech therapists called a “speaking valve.”

“*Primera vez aquí,*” he said. “Very exciting.”

“Good for you,” I replied.

The guy was looking closely at me now. “Why you here?”

Was it not obvious? “This ol’ pain in the neck.”

“*¿Qué dijo?*” The guy looked puzzled.

“This pain in my neck. The trach,” I repeated a bit more loudly, pointing to the tracheostomy.

“*El tubito, sí,*” the guy said, nodding. “*Yo también. Espero que van a quitarlo.*”

“What?”

“Sorry. I...I hope they take out *el tubito,*” he said. “*Con permiso.*” The man hit a switch by his left hand, gradually tilting back in his power chair until his white-and-red sneakers dangled higher than his head. Time for pressure relief.

We paused for a moment as he settled into his new position. Then, feeling a little guilty, I spoke up. “Buddy, I don’t think that’s gonna happen.”

“What’s happening?”

“They won’t take out your trach,” I said, pointing at the guy’s neck.

“How you know?”

“I’ve been coming here for a long time and seen a lot of people. Almost no one ever gets it taken out.”

“¿*De verdad?*”

“I know for sure. The docs have been here for years. No, decades. Things don’t change.” I nodded in the direction of the blond kid in scrubs, who was swiping away on his phone, totally oblivious. “Is he your caretaker?”

“*Es el enfermero. Se llama Chris.*”

“You know that if you don’t have a trach, they’ll probably take away a lot of your home health hours,” I said, lowering my voice to a whisper. “Think about it. They aren’t gonna pay for Chris to watch you twelve hours a day just to flush a G-tube and check your Foley.”

“Foley?”

“Yeah. It’s that tube they put in your... uh, down there.” I pointed to his crotch.

He glanced down, then nodded in understanding. “*Comprendo ahora,*” he said. “*El otro tubito.*”

“Sorry, buddy.” I shrugged.

“How about you?” he asked. “You want *el tubito* out?”

“The trach? Maybe someday.” I exhaled deeply. Honestly, I didn’t like talking about that too much. Still, the kid seemed nice enough, and I wasn’t sure how much of my conversation he understood anyway. “They say I could get sick if they take it out,

so I told them to just leave it in. Lung infection's not worth it."

"*Se suponía que iban a quitar el tubito antes de salir del hospital, pero los médicos no estaban disponibles,*" the guy replied.

"Uh, English, *por favor,*" I said. I know maybe ten words in Spanglish.

"*Lo siento...*ah, supposed to take out *el tubito* in hospital. But doctors not there," the man continued.

"Not there? What do you mean?"

"Told me no doctors available to take out *el tubito.*"

"Really?" I asked. "How long were you in the hospital?"

"*Tres o cuatro semanas aquí.* Three, four weeks. I leave hospital last week."

"There's always a doc here. Doctor Grayson never takes a vacation." I was genuinely curious. "You know what happened?"

"*No sé, señor.*" He twitched his shoulders.

We didn't say anything for a while. Eventually Chris got up, glanced around, and went to the registration desk. "Where's the bathroom?" he asked.

"Uh, down the hall. The one here's being remodeled," I heard Dana reply.

"Cool, thanks." Chris hastily returned to our corner. "*Mateo, necesito ir al baño. ¿Va a estar bien por sí mismo?*"

"*Sí, por supuesto,*" Mateo said.

"*Un momento.*" Chris walked quickly out the waiting room.

I nodded and grinned, trying to resume the conversation. "So I take it you're Mateo? I'm Johnny."

“*Mucho gusto.*” Mateo smiled pleasantly.

“Nice to meet you.” But before I could continue, Dana poked her head out the registration window and called out, “Johnny!”

“Yeah?” I yelled back from the corner of the room.

“Doctor’s ready!”

“Thanks.” I powered on my wheelchair. “See you around, Mateo. And good luck.” I meant it.

“*Hasta luego,*” said Mateo.

I pressed forward on the joystick, rolling swiftly toward the registration office. Suddenly, the office door opened and Dana appeared. I screeched to a halt. “Holy crap, you scared me!” I blurted out.

“Sorry, dear. You mind if I go in with you?” she asked.

That’s strange. The nurse never comes in the room. The docs did everything. “Sure, I guess.” I followed Dana as she led me past registration into one of the exam rooms. I never liked the rooms; they were too small for people in wheelchairs. They probably were built in a time before people cared about patient feedback.

A guy in a white coat was already in the room, staring at something on a portable computer workstation. He swiveled around on his stool to face me as Dana and I entered. The guy was young, tall, and muscular with light brown eyes and crew cut. He wore a starched white shirt with a tightly knotted striped red-and-blue tie and matching brown khakis and loafers. The guy adjusted a pair of thin, wiry glasses on the bridge of his nose as he sized me up.

Dana spoke first, somewhat excitedly. “Johnny, this is Doctor Phillips. He’s our new lung doctor. He just started in July, a month or so ago. He’s even volunteered to train me to assist with these tracheostomy changes, so that’s why I’m in the room now.” She turned away and began opening the cabinets, assembling the equipment for the tracheostomy change.

Now that was a surprise.

“Hey, doc,” I said. “No offense, but...where are Doctor Martinez and Doctor Grayson? Why can’t I see them instead?” This new guy was probably young enough to be their grandson.

“Oh, they don’t work here anymore,” Doctor Phillips answered vaguely. He spun toward the monitor quickly, pointing at something on the monitor and muttering to himself.

What the heck? I was shocked. “They never said they were planning to leave,” I said, stumbling a little on the words.

“I think it was a bit sudden,” Doctor Phillips agreed, turning away from the computer and looking at me. “Anyway, as Dana said, I’m Doctor Ron Phillips, and I’ll be taking care of you from now on.”

I was quiet for a while, trying to digest the news. Dana finished laying out the new trach tube, lubricant, and gauze on a clean towel and stood off to one side, silently watching us. “Then, you’re in charge now, doc?” I finally asked.

“That is correct, Johnny.”

I snorted. “Don’t take this the wrong way, doc, but you seem kind of young to be taking over.”

A grim expression, with maybe a hint of melancholy, flitted over Doctor Phillips' face, but he recovered quickly. "Is that so?" he said slowly. "I hear that a lot. Regardless, it does not change the fact that I am the new Chief of Pulmonary Medicine at this hospital." He reached out purposefully and grasped my hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

So Doctor Martinez and Doctor Grayson were really gone. That was a big change.

Doctor Phillips was looking closely at me, probably analyzing my reaction. If he knew why the other docs left, he wasn't saying. But maybe he really didn't know what was up. Or maybe he didn't want to gossip.

Either way, I realized that I was probably being a little hard on the guy. It's not like I had anything to gain by pissing off the new doc. "Okay, then," I replied. "So I take it you've probably read my file and know why I'm here. I've got some soreness here in my neck."

"Your trach site? Sure," he replied, almost casually. "But let's not rush things. I have some questions for you first."

"Questions? Okay, let's hear 'em."

Doctor Phillips cleared his throat. "I was looking at your chart just now, and I was trying to figure out why you still have that tube in your neck."

"Excuse me?" Has anyone ever asked me that question? I can't remember.

"Let's start from the beginning. The chart says your spinal cord injury is C-seven, incomplete," he continued. "Is that right?"

“Yep.”

“And you’re not having trouble swallowing or anything like that? You eat by mouth?”

“Sure do, I eat fine. Lots of tacos and pizza. Probably more than I should.” I grinned. “They took out the G-tube a long time ago.”

“We can discuss your dietary choices later,” he said. We both laughed. “Have you been hospitalized in the last year or two? Pneumonia, anything like that?”

“Nope.” I was pretty proud of that fact, actually. I’ve had my fill of hospitals, having spent the first three or four months after my accident in one or another. “At least not since my initial injury.”

Doctor Phillips nodded encouragingly. “Do you use a ventilator at home?”

“Heck no. I hate that damn machine.” I was a little surprised to hear the words escaping my mouth. “I hardly even need to suction. Like once every couple of months or so.”

“Huh. That’s interesting.” The doctor tilted his head. “Have you had any recent surgery? Do you have any surgery coming up?”

“Nope.”

“Great. Then let’s see how strong your lungs are. Please go ahead and cough as hard as you can for me.” He leaned forward on his stool, his hands folded under his stubbled chin.

I clenched my neck and chest muscles like the therapists taught me and forced out a dry cough. I thought it sounded so-so at best.

Doctor Phillips frowned. “That’s pretty good. Quite good, actually.” He picked up a red-capped

tube that Dana had set out on the countertop and held it out in his fingertips. “Have you ever used a red plug? Like this one?”

“Sure, once or twice,” I replied, wondering where he was headed with this conversation. No way he’s thinking of taking the trach out. I added, “Doctor Grayson said before that my cough wasn’t that good. He told me that I should use the green speaking valve instead of that red cap. So I use the speaking valve all the time.”

“Is that right.” It came out more like a statement than a question. Doctor Phillips set the red tube down. “And you don’t smoke or drink alcohol?”

“No way. Bastard who ran me over was drunk driving.” Surprised myself again. Still, it wouldn’t hurt to open up a bit to the new doc. Can’t blame him for not knowing about my history yet, like Doctor Martinez or Doctor Grayson.

“Alright. Let me look at your neck. Don’t worry, I’ll change out your trach also.” I cleared my throat and exposed the trach. Doctor Phillips swiftly pulled out the old tube and pointed out that I had some granulation tissue around the trach that was probably the cause of the soreness in my neck. After cauterizing the granulation with one of those silver nitrate sticks, he lubricated a new trach and replaced it in my neck. I reflexively coughed a bit when he put the thing in; I noticed Doctor Phillips nodding to himself. Without delay, Dana expertly slid a new split gauze sponge underneath the trach.

The entire process took less than a minute. The doc was efficient, no question about it: definitely

faster than either Doctor Martinez or Doctor Grayson.

Doctor Phillips pulled off his blue gloves with a loud snap and tossed them in a trash bin, while Dana began cleaning up the trash left over from the trach change. “Like I mentioned before,” Doctor Phillips began slowly, leaning back on his stool, “I don’t know why you still have that trach tube.”

That’s the second time he brought that up. “Sorry, I don’t think I heard you right. It sounded like you’re saying that you want to take this trach out.”

“That’s right,” he said, more assertively now. “It needs to come out. I don’t have a good reason why you need it at this point.”

I blinked in astonishment. “Hold on a sec. You really do want to take it out?”

“Yes, I do.” He raised his eyebrows slightly. “In fact, you’re probably at higher risk of complications from leaving the trach in unnecessarily. Scarring of the windpipe, skin infections, bleeding—”

“Wait, wait, wait,” I interrupted him. “I’ve had this damn dog collar around my neck for ten years, and Doctor Martinez and Doctor Grayson kept telling me all this time that I needed it. And they’re experts. Now all of a sudden you’re saying I don’t?”

“Well, not right away, Johnny,” he said, putting his hands up in what looked like some kind of appeasing gesture. “I’d probably downsize the trach first. You know, get you a smaller size tube. We

might have to do one or two quick tests also, but nothing that would require anesthesia. But yes, that's exactly what I'm saying. You don't need that trach. Period."

I sank back in my wheelchair, stunned. "Heck... is that even possible?" I managed to say. "The other docs wouldn't ever consider it. And they had good reasons. At least I thought they did."

"The other doctors were good people and had their way of doing things," Doctor Phillips said, with the barest hint of a smile. "This is my way."

I stared down at the floor. This changed everything. I wondered just how much Mateo had heard about the new doc during the last few weeks. "Gotta say, doc, this wasn't what I expected. I come here every month, and it's always the same old, same old."

Doctor Phillips leaned forward on his stool, straightening his glasses and folding his hands together. "Well, then. Are you ready for change?"

Gordon Sun is an otolaryngologist. He enjoys writing short fiction and listening to electronic music.
Email: Gordon.H.Sun@gmail.com