Trying To Leave It Behind

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I read a blog post [1] today by a surgeon whose pieces we often pick up for this e-newsletter, Dr. Bruce Campbell, a Medical College of Wisconsin Otolaryngologist. I enjoy reading Dr. Campbell's blog posts because he often brings his personal feelings and anecdotes into the story, making it more compelling.

This post is no different. In it, Dr. Campbell discusses his attempt to take a vacation with his family and escape work. The story comes to its pinnacle when Dr. Campbell must choose between his laptop and the beach with his family. Haunted by the man reading the New York Times through the vending machine plastic, unable to leave his work behind, he thankfully chooses the beach.

Vacations. We all need one now and again. I'd say many professionals of any kind in today's society feel they don't get enough time to relax and enjoy time off to be spent with family and friends. Gadgets such as the Blackberry and iPhone don't help. No matter where we go, the continuous stream of emails and voicemails acts as a constant reminder that work is waiting.

Advancing surgical technology is no exception. From telemedicine robots to new iPhone apps, technology is working to enhance surgeon-patient communication capabilities by making the surgeon accessible to the patient virtually all the time. From a patient care standpoint, it's great. Surgeons can check in on their patients from wherever they are located and at any time of day. Questions can be answered and complications can be diagnosed and treated, vitals can be monitored even without the surgeon and patient being in the same room.

However, from a personal-life perspective, this technology might not be so ideal for

surgeons. While it can be a relief to a physician to have the ability to check up on patients, and provide patients and their families peace of mind knowing their doctor is within reach no matter where the location, these capabilities also bring heightened expectations.

Surgeons have a different level of responsibility toward their patients than professionals in different work sectors have toward their clients. Surgeons are responsible for their patients' lives. A patient may not be very forgiving if they are experiencing post-operative complications and their surgeon cannot be reached because the doctor is lounging with a margarita in hand on the beach in Cabo.

There is an expectation for surgeons to always be there for their patients (think 80-hour work weeks, responding to calls at 2 a.m., etc). Now, advancing technology giving surgeons the ability to be accessible to their patients and available for communication at all times is making it less excusable for a surgeon to be absent, even for a much-needed vacation.

So my question is: where do we draw the line? When is it ok for a surgeon *not* to answer a call about a patient, even when there is a problem to be dealt with? A surgeon has a responsibility to take the best care of their patient as possible. At the same time, everyone—even surgeons—deserve occasional time off.

The rise of surgical technology that improves surgeon-patient communication capabilities is making that line fuzzier. While it's undoubtedly an improvement for patient care, it increases the responsibility for the surgeon to always be accessible and available for their patients, even when they are trying to enjoy some hard-earned rest and relaxation.

Did you try to take a vacation recently? How did it go? E-mail me at amanda.mcgowan@advantagemedia.com [2]

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