



## Blessed

■ THOMAS ZIERING, MD

Dr. Ziering is a family physician in private practice in Bernardsville, NJ. He is dedicated to the care of all families and all health issues regardless of gender, sexual orientation, race, creed or belief.

**A**s a Family Practitioner for over 30 years I adore my work, feel accomplished, know my patients well both health-wise and life-wise (their families, their jobs, their stresses, their accomplishments and their challenges). I, like many others before me have tried HMOs, concierge medicine, private practice and corporate medicine. I teach medical students, doctors in training and doctors in practice the latest treatments and the most up-to-date developments in LGBTIQ2 health care not because I get paid, but because I enjoy teaching something no one else seems to know. I save lives by giving lectures about Prep and Pep, the state-of-the-art prophylaxis of HIV, and each practitioner who “gets it” will prevent the spread of the HIV virus, saving even more lives with a simple tablet a day.

To survive financially in this time of health care, I tried corporate medicine like many others before me. The business aspect was taken care of, my malpractice and health insurances were covered and I had access to electronic medical records. Not to mention a healthy financial incentive. I loved my colleagues and enjoyed working with a team at my back and at the ready. It seemed like a brilliant concept, but at what cost?

The drawback? The patient interactions became shorter; the sense that I could be missing a critical diagnosis grew every day. I left for work at 5 a.m. to do computer work until patients started at 7:30, and spent as much time as I could with them:

scheduled till 6 p.m. but working until 8 to give patients the time they needed. Then it was computer time for two to three hours, and returning home exhausted at 10 p.m., often not having eaten and falling directly to bed with my clothes on only to wake at 4 a.m., undress, shower, dress and do it again. I had entered the treadmill and it became more and more unforgiving with each day. This was not “good medicine” as I had known it from my private practice days. Health care shifted from patient-focused and good listening to seeing an exhausting caseload of patients and a myriad of RVU minimums and incentives. My joy was gone, my self-esteem plummeted, my life was no longer in my control, my husband didn’t see me nor did my grandchild, because I was too exhausted to function. I was a dinosaur, a square peg trying to fit in a round hole. Clearly, the new model of medicine that promised \$\$\$ but at the unforeseen cost of my soul and the inability to utilize the full scope of my profession in order to “funnel to the specialists” proved frustrating, disappointing, and truly heartbreaking. My mood changed. My love of figuring out a tough diagnosis, reading up on cases and at times spending one to two hours on literature searches gave way to seeing the minimum amount 16-18 patients in record time, making an accurate, spot-on diagnosis or transferring them to a specialist in order to save time. Something had to give... and it was at the risk of my sanity and satisfaction of a career in family medicine that afforded so much diversity (minor surgery, orthopedics, dermatology, gyn, internal medicine and now LGBTIQ2 medicine) to an underserved population at risk.

I left corporate medicine after a lot of soul searching and months of misery and

fear of financial collapse, and returned to what I now call value-based medicine. I see a maximum of seven to 10 patients a day and offer them as much time as they need and address as many issues as I can. In return, my patients pay in-full at time of service and apply for reimbursement for out-of-network expenses with insurance ready forms. No one complains, not because it isn’t an expensive layout, but because the value of health care is being fastidious, being obsessive-compulsive, listening to your patients and sometimes hand-holding and helping people get through the rough spots in life. I was privy to that as a child, and my personal physician, much like myself, takes time and listens and truly cares about my health and welfare. To me, that’s worth everything.

I am hugged by my patients, many of whom call me Tom, and am welcomed back into their lives with open arms. I relish hearing stories of their lives and sharing stories of my own. I hear over and over again my patients concerns about me while I was on the treadmill. “We were worried about you... you didn’t seem like your old self.” “You looked tired and unhappy; we couldn’t imagine how you could make this change...” “You just weren’t you! Now you’re happy again... it’s all over your face! You’re a real old-fashioned family doctor” – the finest compliment I could ever get.

Is it frustrating being in debt again at 56 and running a business? Yes indeed. But my happiness level and sense of joy, accomplishment and self-esteem are back up where I know I’m making a difference and I know I’m fulfilling a legacy dating back generations. And yes, I worry every day if this is sustainable and wonder if I have “cut my nose off to spite my

*continued >>>*

face.” But I consider myself not just a physician but a healer, and I just don’t fit into a system that values revenue more than exceptional care, which is what I have also strived to perform.

First week on my own I listened to a 24-year-old man talking about blood in his stool. Given 15 minutes, I might have chalked this up to hemorrhoids; after all the young man was 24. But I listened and I asked more questions and I spent the time needed to say, “There’s more here than meets the eye.” An urgent colonoscopy later, the young man was diagnosed with colon cancer, it was resected and he is doing well. I had the affirmation I needed to remind me I had made the right choice. It haunts me that had I rushed I might have missed the diagnosis.

Medicine has changed before and in 30 years I have seen so many vacillations in concepts. This isn’t the medicine I envisioned... so I needed to reinvent myself again at 56 and start from scratch. I sleep

at night, I spend time with my husband and time with my patients. I didn’t choose family medicine to be wealthy (financially, it’s one of the lowest-paid specialties, just above Pediatrics). I chose it for its diversity, challenges and the profound intimacy of the doctor-patient relationship. I wanted to be the quarterback of medicine and look past “a heart, lung, a brain, an organ.” I wanted to see the whole person, not just the disease.

I’m not singing the blues and I’m not “raking in the bucks.” I’m loving my career again and I’m seeing the benefits of my work/doctor ethics and I don’t ever envision when I would fully retire. Why do so when you love your career? I have a sign in my office that reads, “If you love what you do, you never work a day in your life.” I aspire to that. But believe me when I say I do worry if I can sustain financially what I believe in... only time will tell.

The pendulum will swing again. I hope I’m ahead of it but if I’m not, I’m proud of

my career and I’m proud of my caregiving and thank God, I deeply love what I’ve chosen as a career. Could this all fall apart? Absolutely. Could my desire to fulfill a promise and an Oath of Hippocrates give way to financial collapse for my entire family? Yes, that is the cloud that hangs over my head. But I can smile through the rain and I can even laugh in the rain... and rain is just water.

I dedicate this diatribe to my son, Jarrett Wieselmann, who encouraged me to make a change at this late stage of life. The young man I did my best to raise even when I wasn’t around so much has now become the teacher and voice of reason. “Jarrett, you’re 35, it’s easy to make a change at your stage of life,” I said. His response (so simple really): “If you’re miserable, you try to make it work or you walk away.” If you are a square peg trying to fit into a round hole, you either compromise and settle for the perks, or you move forward in a way that makes you happy. I am blessed. ▲



*Comments from attendees in 2017:*

*“Wonderful course. I will definitely take it again even just for CME. It is a very good source for review.”*

*“After going to this conference, my confidence in passing the exam has measurably increased and I am less anxious about it.”*

*“Overall great course. One of the best I have been to. Thank you!”*



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