



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

It's scary when your GP gives you bad news

David Hines © 16th October 2022

Intro

A couple of days ago I heard about a friend who was 80 years old and said he had aged more in the past year than the previous 10 years. He had a heart attack and prostate problem in the same year.

I had a similar experience this month. I went to my GP for my routine checkup, but I took a longer than usual list of questions: five of them. Two of these were old issues, up to about eight years ago, but had got so used to them I didn't bother reporting them any longer.

Eye test

And the doctor shocked me by giving not one but two serious opinions in two consecutive days:

The first was during the interview itself. She gave me an eye test and said you should not be driving; you are a danger to yourself and others.

The next shock was the following day when the blood test results came in. They showed a serious heart problem.

She had tried to text me, but I didn't see them. Then she phoned me at home, about 8 o'clock at night, and said she had made appointment for me at Auckland hospital that night. I must go there right away, and ask to see the officer in charge.

So Marion called an ambulance ... so I packed a bag in five minutes, and off we went.

But I did not follow my GPs advice

Now one way to deal with a crisis is simple: follow your doctor's advice. I recall that Ted said a few weeks ago, we need simplicity. But I am talking about a different situation ... and in this case I did **not** follow my doctor's advice.

Why not: Well I had been to hospital for heart conditions four times in the past 15 years ... but they were mostly very minor ... in three cases I was discharged a day later. So frankly, I was **not** scared of dying of a heart attack that night. I had not ruled it out, but I had come to terms with it.

My second reason was that the heart twinges I reported that day were so small, I didn't raise them at the time ... just booked it up in my once in three months checkup. They had happened about a month earlier. I felt I was not the panic merchant; My doctor was.

The hospital

The hospital put me in bed and monitored my heart overnight. About two o'clock they woke me up and said the heart condition had hardly changed since I was there three years ago. But they took me for a chest x-ray just in case, and said they would assess it all in the morning.

In the morning they took me off the monitor about 7 o'clock and said wait for the doctor. I thought: taking the monitor off means they think I am no longer in danger.

The opinion

And I waited and waited. About 11 o'clock I got sick of waiting... and asked the ward nurse why I couldn't go home. She got the doctor ... who looked a bit sheepish for having overlooked me. And he asked me three questions:

1. He said when did you have these chest twinges ... I said one or two months ago. He said it was nothing to worry about then.
2. Then he told me about the blood test showing I had a high level of troponin, which **can** indicate a heart attack, but not necessarily. And he had looked up my past records and my level was not much higher than then.
3. He asked me about the marathon training I had been doing. I said I had a six kilometre run the day before. He said were you breathing heavily afterwards. I said No. And said: no way are you heading for a heart attack.

You should not have been sent here.

I asked why they didn't release me at 2.30 that morning when they woke me up for a chest x-ray. He said that was just looking for some other interpretation.. They didn't find one. My discharge report said triponinema of no known cause.

But I had already come to a similar conclusion before I got there.

Driving

While I was waiting eight hours for the doctor, I had a nice breakfast and passed the time studying another worrying problem. Why should I be barred from getting a driving license. That actually bugged me more than the heart.

My GP based that conclusion on an eye test she gave me at the checkup.

But the only reason she gave me an eye test in the first place was that I had told her about a bad experience I had a couple of weeks before. I was picking my sister up from the airport about 7pm; it got dark while I was waiting. As I was driving home in started raining and I couldn't see the road when I came out of the Poiint Chevalier tunnel. It's a slick road, and reflecting light, so the only way I could figure which way to turn was to follow the car in front. A couple of minutes later I was off the motorway, and safely driving home.

Scary. I decided I would not drive at night again, especially on a motorway.

But I did not need a GP to tell me that.

Double evidence my eyes were OK

And another reason I was not over-worried about my eyes: I had already been to the an eye expert at **Greenlane medical centre** a month earlier ... and my eyesight **was** worse in my right eye... but the report was stable in both eyes. So my eyes were marginal, but not getting worse.

So I frankly got pissed off that my GP wanted to ban me from driving **totally**.

I **also had a second opinion that my eyes were not too bad, from my optometrist:** they had prescribed me new glasses, which I received just weeks before... these were driving glasses. Why would they sell me driving glasses if I was not fit to drive?

So I thought ... I am going to get another opinion. And in the hospital, I looked up who can give eye tests for a driving license. I found the AA does eye tests ... there are probably other doctors who do eye tests ... and optometrists.

Adding to my horror still there in hospital I checked my driving license... and found it had expired just over a year ago.. I was then 82, but had forgotten to renew it.

So what I feared was already true. It was already illegal for me to drive.

So I phoned NZSTA and found that I didn't have to go back to square one and do my beginners driving test again ... I just had to apply for a renewal... and I could just get the optometrist to write a report ... and the doctor would have to certify other aspects of my health.

So my hopes started to lift. I thought I will get that same optometrist who provided my new glasses; to give me a driving license test ... which is slightly different from the doctor's test... because they look at peripheral vision and other issues.

I had a third unpleasant experience over these issues. My driving companion is not very sympathetic when I ask for a lift to various place I want to go to ... she often puts me off. And suggests I go at a more convenient time etc. I thought this is really going to be horrible if I am dependent on this one driver the rest of my life.

So I checked and found you don't actually need a license to ride an e-scooter ... unless it is more powerful than 300 watts. And you can get one for \$500.

Life suddenly looked less disastrous than it did two days earlier.

Optometrist opinion

So the next day, I asked my driver to take me to the optometrist... and it actually became enjoyable. The optometrist started with a peripheral eye test. Which made me laugh with relief. I knew there was nothing wrong with my

peripheral vision... I could see overtaking cars well in advance. The only reason I need glasses at all is my **central** vision, which has 6/12 for both eyes.

And after the optometrist had finished testing. I said ... I appreciate my night vision is not up to scratch ... you didn't ask me about that. She said No. Would you **want** a restricted licence? I said no. I already know to be careful about that.

Second GP opinion

But the next step was another tricky one. I would need to get my form signed by a GP ... because the form asks the GP about a number of issues quite apart from your eyesight. If you're on dangerous drugs,, for instance. Would my evil GP use that to ban me from driving?

So I booked an appointment But with a **different** doctor.

But the bad news continued. I booked to see another doctor, at my usual medical centre ... but when I showed up at the centre, the receptionist said: we've booked you with your usual doctor ... she's got a free spot today.

I said: aargh, or something like that. I want to get a second opinion.

So I got one, but as I was going in to the new doctor's room my old doctor saw me in the corridor: hi doctor. I was getting panicky again.

The next bit was easy. The other GP was sympathetic. I seemed to do better at the eye test. He still said I shouldn't be driving at night.

And I wondered why he didn't read my doctors eye test. But he had looked at all my eye tests for the past year ... and said the optometrist's one was the most up to date, so he was going by that. So I passed the doctors test.

Albert Street is haunted

Fate had one more twist of the knife for me. The nearest place to get a license was the AA at Albert Street in central Auckland. I knew there were lots

of roads blocked in Albert street because of the new railway tunnel. And I got lost. Finally , I could see the AA right across the road, and cars were driving right past it. But pedestrians were not allowed to cross there. I asked a traffic officer how I could cross that road, and He said I had to go a block in the opposite direction, basically do a six block detour. I got one turn wrong but eventually I got there.

By then I was a bundle of nerves expecting something else to go wrong. There were only about six people in front of me in the queue, but it took an hour. The person taking my details was nice, but halfway through she passed the sheet to a second person with a badge that said Trainee. I felt sure he was going to get some essential fact wrong and I will have to come back another day and do it again. But he got it right and he wrote me a temporary license right away.

And the next day the sun came out from behind the clouds ... the sun of optimism I mean.

I did some re-thinking

First I thought will I show my disgust for my doctor's errors by switching to the other doctor who passed me.

I thought no. To be fair to her: the reason she had so many recommendations that day, was because I raised so many issues.

In fact, she was still working on two of them. One was a prostate operation that I had about six years ago ... it got cancelled because I had a bad reaction to the anaesthetic ... I asked her: could I still get that operation; she said yes it was possible ... it Another was a minor bowel problem I thought was incurable. She said that was possibly curable a well.

I still hadn't heard her answers about them. It would be really petty to ask another doctor to deal with them.

She had in fact taken $\frac{3}{4}$ of an hour for that initial examination three times the usual amount ... because I had given her so many medical issues to review. She was a hero. She investigated them all.

Well the very next day I got a letter from Auckland hospital, saying my GP had recommended me for an operation and they were booking me for a preliminary test ... and I thought: thank you amazing GP, for your attention to detail.

The letter from the hospital didn't say what **kind** of operation I had been booked for. But I was more philosophical by then. I figured it was either a prostate operation, or one for my bowel. So I might still wet myself occasionally, and I might still have bowel problems. But at least I wouldn't have both happening at the same time.

I might even get the **second** operation a few months later. I was in octogenarian heaven.

Conclusion

Now why do I tell you all this ... all of us have different medical stories to tell. But I pass my story along because I am 83 years old ... and at that age your medical issues are happening more frequently.

And that can damage your self-esteem

But you don't have to be elderly to have that problem. Disabled people have it all the time. Teenagers have better odds, but they are not immune either.

And all of us face unsympathetic friends who put us down.

But there are also many, many helpers ... including counsellors who will help us through the low esteem.

And many of us are lucky to have good listeners among our friends,

Or a church like this one which listens to our joys and concerns.

Summing up – there are three messages I took from this scary week.

I was talking about this with my wife Marion and she said ... where is the good news in this ... is to **count your blessings**. I said that has been **my** answer in this particular month. **So that is lesson number one.**

But I said at other times there will not be a good future.

And you may just need resilience; or at 83 you may say I've had a good life and I'm ready to go.

The Christian apostle Paul had a very black last few years of his life in house arrest in Rome ... and his lifeline was writing letters to his fellow church members. Some of them are now in our bible. Letters to the Corinthians, Ephesians, Thessalonians.

And in one of these letters he said:

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. & From now on there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day. I am ready to say that.

I don't believe in the crown of righteousness ... but I find the other three encouraging..

So resilience has been the second message from the last month.

The third lesson is helpful friends and experts

And my fourth lesson is healing your past.

Many of our worst troubles are in our minds And they come from our past. Maybe from a childhood where we had poor chances, and they can still poison our minds.

This is where psychology can help ... it can heal those bad memories and reconcile us to other people. And My most recent case of that not from a psychologist; it was my own re-assessment. Realising that My own doctor was not a bad person but a very good person when I got the wider picture.

And when I remembered my past medical misfortunes she booked me into hospital again, to get them fixed. She was also fixing my past omissions.

So my four new lessons are

1. Count your blessings.
2. Learn resilience, for when your blessings run out.
3. Friends can repair your self esteem
4. And you yourself can repair past grievances and errors, maybe with expert help

Skills that are useful at any age ... but especially at 80-plus, when your problems are coming two at a time.

Meditation / Discussion starter

What are some of the toughest blows to our self-esteem?

What can we do to help ourselves through?