

The World's Worst Job

GUEST COLUMN

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I'm a hugger. Always have been, always will be. My parents brought me up to be one; I married one, and my doctor is one. Problem is, when my doctor has bad news for me, instead of walking into the room with a smile and giving me a big hug, as she usually does, she walks in frowning and sits straight down in the chair. It's an instant give away. And the problem is, if she's going to tell me bad news, then that's when I need a big hug the most!

You get to know the ways of your doctor when you've been with them for some time, and you also get to understand why they do the things they do.

Ever watched the show "The Actor's Studio"? Then you'll know that, at the end of the interview, the guest is asked the same set of general questions about themselves. One of them is "what job wouldn't you like to attempt?" My answer would be oncologist.

Have you ever thought how hard it must be to be an oncologist? A large number, if not most of your patients, will eventually die of their disease. Are they sadists? Have they made peace with death as an ever day occurrence? I doubt it by the reaction my doctor gives me to suspicious activity. That's why I can't really blame her for being a hugger when all's well, and then putting up a barrier when it's not. It's a protection mechanism, because I'm guessing that when you're close to a patient, seeing them failing treatment hurts.

Imagine walking into one exam room all smiles and cheery, and telling someone all is going well, and then having to compose yourself and walk into the next one and tell them their cancer is back or that there may not be anything more you can do for them. How could a human being deal with that without having some coping strategy? I guess over time things balance out and you do "get used to it." You play out a professional role at work and then go home, have a glass of wine and hug your dog and spouse.

Oncologists are heroes of the medical world. Yes, I may have criticized a few in the past, but I suddenly realized how much of a sacrifice they make, especially when it comes to getting close to their patients. Instead of standing back and remaining distant all the time, they do let down their guard and let you into their hearts.

So listen up Doc. Next time you have bad news for me I'll gladly take a sympathetic smile and hug from my friend. Because while I'm hugging you, the only question I really have is "so how do we kick butt this time?" Then you can sit down and be my doctor.

Kay Kerbyson is former Secretary of the Los Alamos Council on Cancer, and Founder/President of Ovarian Cancer Together Inc., the only non-profit specifically supporting women in New Mexico with ovarian cancer. Resources, support and education materials, for those effected by cancer, can be found at www.losalamoscounciloncancer.org and www.ovariancancertogether.org