

8 November 2008

Hello from Bdad,

This week started off not so good. I was on my second trauma call and had made it through the night almost completely unscathed. I took care of some minor things earlier in the day, but nothing too bad. The election was taking place and for some reason I woke early around 0430 and decided to check the results. The phone rings at 0500. I can't believe it; I had almost made it through the night.

An young Iraqi and his slightly older looking aunt were driving too close to a convoy when it passed through a checkpoint. The aunt was driving and the folks in the convoy opened fire. The boy was shot in the chest and abdomen and his aunt was shot several times in the legs. I get down to the trauma room and the boy does not look so good. I took him straight to the operating room and we did everything we could but he did not survive. It was not a good day. Then I had to turn around and operate on his sister whose injuries were not that bad. She did fine. Several hours after her surgery I had to explain to her through an interpreter that her nephew had died. It was not fun. Pain and suffering, misery and loss do not care if you are an American or Iraqi. These two definitely were not terrorists, but the aunt was not smart and made a poor decision--and paid a pretty high price.

That Tuesday was the worst day so far. I have to write up a detailed report and present it to all the administrators who usually don't get out of the shower until 0800. They would not know where to find the operating room, though most have been here for a year or more. On Wednesday one burn surgeon left, and our permanent burn surgeon joined us. Good news. Couldn't be too soon because over the weekend I picked up a 14yo Iraqi who was caught in a kerosene fire and got very badly burned. So now I will have some help with managing him.

Thursday we had this interesting conference with all of the hospitals working in the war zones. It is a teleconference among the hospitals in Iraq (Mosul, Bdad, and Ballad), Afghanistan (Kabul and somewhere else can't remember), Germany, Walter Reed and Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio. Basically we get to find out what happened to our patients after they leave here. Also if you screwed up or if someone disagreed with how you managed something here in Bdad then you get to bend over and take it like a man in front of everyone. Essentially the guys in Germany and Walter Reed who are not deployed get to be arm chair quarterbacks and second guess everyone in theater's management. So on Tuesday I was informed that Germany had requested follow up on the patient that I mentioned last week. I was concerned that something bad had happened and they were going to initiate a public scourging on yours truly. Thankfully however the news was good. My guy made it back to the states to Walter Reed where they re-explored him and found everything to be as it should be and they closed him.

Yesterday I was on second call and a senior citizen Iraqi lady was caught in a crossfire. She was shot in the neck, abdomen, and leg. Another surgeon and I took her to the OR and she is going to do well. Just now today my roommate got called down. Three of our guys were blown up by an IED. One took a load of shrapnel to the head. He came in with CPR in progress and died in the trauma bay. The other two are in the OR with extremity injuries but should be OK.

The problem with Trauma is that most patients who are alive when they get here without CPR going on are going to do OK. It is that small population of patients with life threatening injuries that are going to die within several minutes of arriving to the hospital if you do not make all of the correct decisions that are the hardest to treat. There is no time to waste in this group and the system has to be perfect and efficient in getting that patient to the OR. That is the kind of patient that I had the other night, and we failed him. I was not a happy camper. There are lot things that went wrong that morning, and that is all I will say about that.

I recently went back for Dinner in Sadaam's palace. The food there is actually pretty good. The funny part though is there were people swimming laps in his pool. Unbelievable, I am walking around in a war zone with a loaded pistol, and people are having a leisurely swim in Sadaam's pool. It really is funny to see.

I am getting to be pretty close with several of the surgeons and other docs here. There are some really good people, and they are all doing their best with really minimal resources. There is a constant political struggle here at this hospital. The administrators do not want patients in the hospital for longer than a few days. Every morning we have a morning report where the administrators go through all of the ICU patients and ward patients with the clinicians and you have to give the administrators your plan for that pt and when they are going to be discharged. Normally this is not a problem. However we have these long term Iraqi burn patients in the ICU, and the administrators are pushing so hard for us (the surgeons) to transfer them out to the Iraqi facility. The problem is that their facility is totally inadequate and unprepared to deliver the level of care needed to get these patients through. So a few of the other surgeons and I are at odds with the administrators, who seem very concerned about their paperwork and how it looks to their bosses in the states. It is like the VA multiplied by 10. It can really you off if you are not careful. The other issue is that the administrators have all been here for over a year and I think there is some significant burnout. I expect that after six months I will not have the same passion about some of these issues that I have now.

In regards to passing the time I am getting pretty creative. Tomorrow will be my 3rd of approximately 33 primary calls. I just got my first haircut here, and I think that I will enjoy passing the time by the growth of my hair. One go-all around and in one month I will get my second haircut. Five more haircuts and a flight home baby. There are Iraqis doing the haircutting and I was told to ask for the "string treatment". At the end of your hair cut they have this ball of twine that looks almost like dental floss. They put one end in their mouth and form a loop with the other end. They encircle they extra eyebrow hair and the ear hair and actually pluck it out. It would not be so bad except I only have one eyebrow and it is very thick and it covers both eyes. They almost killed me with damn thing. My eyes were watering like hell, because he was plucking so much hair off of my eyebrows. I will not ask for that treatment again. I am also seriously contemplating growing back the moustache as well.

I want everyone to know that I enjoy reading your emails very much. You have all been so supportive. Everyone on this email list knows that I am not the best (understatement of the year) at keeping in touch; however hopefully you all know how much I love and miss you. Currently, I am either really busy or really not. During the down time it is very easy to dwell on home and

the things I do not have, like cold beer on a Saturday afternoon with Alabama fixin' to whoop LSU's butt!!! So the computer and the correspondence is something that I really look forward to so keep sending the emails.

Will keep in touch

E