

October 2009

Dentally Challenged

By Andrew Malekoff

A few months ago there was a news report about a man from upstate New York who was accused of practicing dentistry without a license. The report stated that he operated in his kitchen. In lieu of Novocain he offered his patients wine to help them through the pain. The story brought back a flood of memories from my childhood. One was a traumatic episode that I re-live every time I sit in a dentist's chair.

Our family dentist, a family friend, reminded me of the actor Peter Lorre. If you are too young to recall him, Peter Lorre was an Austrian-American who often played in films with Humphrey Bogart and was typecast as a creepy, sinister foreigner.

Summer Camp

As a pre-teen in New Jersey, many of my friends went away to upstate summer camps in "the mountains." As for me, summer days could be fun or long and boring. I usually stayed at home and spent my summers at area swimming pools and playgrounds or watching baseball games on television. Except, that is, for one summer in the early 1960's. My mom asked me if I'd like to go to sleep away camp for a month. I was ecstatic and said, "Yes!"

Well, that brought about car trips to the doctor for a physical exam and a series of shots, and to the dentist to get my teeth checked out. I passed the physical with flying colors and took the shots in stride. I didn't do as well with the dentist. On the car ride home mom told me that I needed 16 fillings. Since camp was only a few days away she said that I had to get all of the fillings at one time. An appointment was set for the next Friday night at eight-o'clock.

Sitting Down

The dentist's office was in his house and adjacent to his kitchen where my mom sat for four hours drinking coffee and chatting with his wife, as he worked on my teeth. He did not give me Novocain. Inbetween drillings and fillings, "Peter Lorre" slithered away through a door that led to the kitchen, probably for a slug of wine reserved for adult patients, while I sat quietly waiting for the next assault. I was stoic. I didn't complain or shed a tear all night.

I discovered that I could endure lots of pain without complaint on that warm summer night. When we left, I didn't say anything about it to mom or anyone else.

My four weeks at sleep away camp were fun. What I remember most though, as if it was yesterday, were the four hours in the dentist's chair.

Standing Up

I recently found a website dedicated to “dental horror stories.” One was written by someone much younger than me, who said that his dentist was always in a rush. One time when he was a child, he said, the dentist started drilling before the Novocain could take effect and before he was numb. He said, “I grabbed him by the wrist and told him to stop.”

The dentist left in a huff and returned five minutes later to finish the job when he was fully numb. Nevertheless, he refused to see that dentist after the encounter, despite the fact that the dentist had a close association with his family. His parents were very upset by his refusal. “I didn’t care,” he said, “he acted like a jerk, and I wasn’t going to stand for it!”

Good for him and for all children (and others) that are willing to stand up to authority in the right way and at the right time. Good for you!