

The President and His Stent: How the Patient-Physician Relationship Represents What Works Best in U.S. Health Care

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The decision by former President George W. Bush and his doctors to treat a blockage in one of his heart arteries with angioplasty and stenting has become the newest chapter in the intense debate over appropriateness in stenting.

Bush's physical examination revealed irregularities that led to tests that revealed a blockage in his coronary artery, which Bush and his doctors decided to treat with a stent, according to his statement. That he was not having a heart attack and apparently had not felt any symptoms, such as chest pain, brought objections from those who would place sharp limits on the use of stents.

Only President Bush's physicians and family know what alternative therapy choices were presented to Bush, but we do know medical advances allowed him to choose from several therapeutic courses. Bush, in consultation with his doctors, chose the one that was right for him and the quality of life he wished to maintain.

High quality medical care is patient-centered. We strongly value the right of patients, with their doctors, to make informed choices in line with their health and quality of life goals. This right is threatened by critics who would "reform" the health care system by ignoring the complex nature of medicine, cardiovascular disease and the individual needs of each patient.

For those who are quick to dismiss the benefit of stents, I would encourage them to speak to our patients. As a practicing interventional cardiologist, I see first-hand the benefits of interventional cardiology procedures. I see it when a patient's life is saved during a heart attack, in infants born with a serious heart defect whose hearts beat strong because of advances of interventional care and in seniors who enjoy productive lives again after a minimally invasive heart

procedure. In patients with stable coronary artery disease, stenting reduces chest pain from poor circulation of the heart arteries, decreases the need for repeat procedures, and improves the overall circulation of the heart.

And this is what the President Bush case demonstrates: Health care decisions must be made between the patient and his or her doctor. As outsiders in the Bush case, we do not presume to make that decision for him – nor should others. While it is important to review patient cases to continually improve, learn from and advance the science of medicine, we must not judge the appropriateness of a medical decision on the basis of limited information. To do so is to rush to a judgment that is short sighted, uninformed and, ultimately, emphasizes attention-seeking soundbites over patient care.

In our quest to reduce costs and ensure that appropriate and optimal treatment is provided to each patient and is in step with the guidelines, let us not forget the doctor-patient relationship at the heart of all we do as physicians. It is a fundamental trust that must not be jeopardized.

Now tell us what you think. Do you agree that stents are beneficial to patients? Why or why not? What does the case of President Bush illustrate in terms of the doctor-patient relationship?

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