

Spinal Tap

By Diane Hoover Bechtler

The brochure was titled “Care Following Your Lumbar Puncture”. It could easily have said “Preparing for a Metal Rod to Be Shoved in Your Back.” Because I’d had one spinal tap in Charlotte, I thought I knew what it would be like. However, like childbirth, each spinal is an act unto itself. While the Mayo doctor shot my lower back full of Lidocaine, she asked about my previous experience. I obliged with my usual description. “My neurologist took an eight-inch rusty railroad spike and drove it into my spine. Fire shot down my left leg all the way to my foot. Dr. Richardson explained that she’d hit a nerve and that it would crawl away in a few seconds.” I had pictured an octopus in my back squirming to the side. “The burning stopped and she sucked out about a gallon of spinal fluid. I went home, rested for a couple of hours, got antsy, got up, read and played computer chess until dinner.”

The Mayo doc remarked, “No headache?”

I replied, “None at all.”

“May I have the needle when you’re finished, I asked her?” I saw the one from my first tap and it was awesome to think of that cylinder going in my spinal column. “I’d like a souvenir.”

The doctor explained, “I’m sorry but it becomes medical waste. It’s against hospital policy.”

“Okay, I understand.” Actually, I didn’t understand. I was buying that 2-mm hollow, 4 inch long tube. It should be mine for the taking. I decided to be quiet and get on with the procedure.

“Push liquids,” was her next remark. I thought about my room at the Kahler. I had four room temperature Diet Cokes and a couple of liters of water on the dresser. Drinking fluids replaces the ones lost in the tap and caffeine dilates the brain’s blood vessels allowing fluids to rebalance. A patient is supposed to lie completely flat for 24 hours. Those measures ward off the famous headaches caused by spinal taps.

Lie flat for 24 hours. Yeah. I had a CAT scan of my chest, abdomen, and pelvis scheduled for 7 a.m. the next day. Plus, I’d had such an easy time the first go round. I asked the doctor, “What if I want to take a walk later?”

She thought for a moment and said, “That might be good for you. Sure.”

I said, “I was thinking about walking to a shoe store.”

She laughed and slid the needle two inches into my spinal area between the vertebrae. I didn’t even feel a twinge.

She said, “Fluid is clear. No milkiness, no blood.”

I felt teary while she drew out the liquid. “I wish my husband were here.”

“Yeah? How long have you been married?”

“We’re divorced. Four years divorced.”

She stopped for a moment. “Then he’s your ex-husband.”

“I suppose you could say that. We were together 17 years.” I wiped my cheeks. I continued to cry, quietly. “Back when he loved me, he’d never have allowed me to go through all this alone.”

She stopped me, “You’re here alone?” “Yes.”

“You’ll need someone to get you back to your hotel.”

“Ya think?”

My head did not start hurting until Tuesday night after the spinal on Monday. It nagged and aggravated me for seven days, but it was never the pounding suicidal nightmare I’d been cautioned about. Still, seven days is a long headache. No amount of ibuprofen eased it. Lying down helped, at least while I was flat. The minute I sat up it began hurting again. I did not call the doctor until the day I was leaving. Too late for a blood patch. This would have involved drawing blood from my arm and injecting it at the puncture site. The headache was caused by fluid continuing to leak from the puncture into my body or outside the puncture site.

I kept feeling around the Bandaid. Nothing was wet so I guess my fluid leaked into my body.

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