

The Appointment
By Sue Mayfield Geiger

Then:

I drive two miles to the small wooden building with five parking spaces out front.

I open the modest door and walk into the small linoleum-floored office of Dr. Avery where six non-matching chairs are in no particular order. There are two faded Norman Rockwell illustrations on the wall—one depicting a doctor in a white coat getting ready to give a shot to a small boy—the other showing the same doc with a stethoscope on the same boy's back.

Janice is sitting at her desk behind the counter that separates the reception area from the waiting room and greets me with a smile. No sign-in sheet, no filling out forms, no discussion about insurance, no personal questions are asked of me in front of other patients. I don't even have an appointment. I tell her I haven't been feeling well and probably coming down with something. She is sorry I'm not well and tells me to take a seat; that just a few others are ahead of me.

A new patient comes in and approaches Janice who hands him one sheet of paper on a clipboard that the man fills out in less than three minutes. The form is simple: name, address, phone, employment, reason you are here and how will you pay today: cash or check.

I read a *Life* magazine halfway through when Barbara, Dr. Avery's nurse, appears in her white uniform, cap, stockings and shoes to take me back to an exam room.

I hop up on the exam table while Barbara listens to me describe my symptoms. "Yep, we're getting a lot of that," she says.

Next, Dr. Avery appears, smiling, glasses on his face, wearing a tweed coat and paisley tie. He takes the trusty stethoscope from around his neck and listens to my chest; then grabs a wooden stick from a jar and looks down my throat as I do the usual gag reflex. "Pretty red down there," he says as he instructs Barbara to get a shot ready, which ultimately goes into my butt and I shout the usual "ouch!"

A bit more small talk, a handshake and I'm on my way. I walk up to the counter and Janice tells me it will be five dollars for the visit and three dollars for the shot. I can pay today or they will send me a bill. I have some cash on me, so I hand over the eight bucks, get a receipt, go out the door and hop in my car.

The next morning, I feel as good as new. My achiness is gone, my throat no longer sore and I'm feeling no pain. That afternoon, Dr. Avery calls to ask how I'm feeling. He reminds me to call him at home (yes, I have the number—he's given it to all his patients) should I need him, and not to hesitate if it's the middle of the night. (I would indeed find that necessary after I had my colicky firstborn.)

Now:

I opt not to drive to the Medical Center due to traffic, 15-story parking garages, pedestrian pile-up and stress. I find a doctor located in a new building not far from my neighborhood. I call to make the appointment and after being transferred and put on hold for five minutes, I get a live

person. Her first question: what insurance do you have? After giving her the information, including group number, address, phone, etc., I know I will still have to present the card when I appear at the appointment so she can make copies, even though she will be calling the insurance company to verify all this after I hang up.

I am told I will have to wait three weeks for an appointment and will be charged a fee if I do not cancel within 24 hours of the visit.

Three weeks later, I get a reminder call from a voice recording, again reminding me that if for any reason I do not show up, I will be billed for the visit.

The day of my appointment, I find the building and it is the size of a small airport. So much for neighborhood ambience. I find a parking spot among 800 other cars and make a marathon walk to the front door where a security guard greets me and directs me over to an area where a woman asks me what doctor I am seeing and my appointment time. She checks her computer and begins typing. Then she tells me to look at the small screen in front of me (sort of resembles an Etch-A-Sketch), to read the confidentiality statements, sign in four places and date. I comply.

Another screen pops up and again, I am asked to sign even more forms—"for security purposes." I comply.

I am given a yellow 6 x 9 card and escorted down a long hall to see the doctor. I walk in and the waiting room is about 2,000 sq. ft. with approximately 75 chairs—all full of people. There are many, many Janice types sitting behind a very long counter.

"Next," I hear, and I approach. I am asked 15 or 20 personal questions and the keyboard is clicking, but also given forms on a clipboard. I fork over the insurance cards, driver's license and am asked my mother's maiden name. I refuse to answer because I consider it a tremendously silly question. I am sooooooooooooo missing Dr. Avery, who is retired or dead by now.

I am working on the forms when a person in green scrubs opens a door, calls my name (which she mispronounces) and I follow her into a part of the office that looks like NASA Command Central. We go into a smaller room where she asks me to stand on a platform the size of a garage door to get my weight. Next she pokes something on my temple that takes my temperature in two seconds, while my blood pressure is being read. She asks me why I'm here. I've already told the computer lady up front, now I will tell this person (nurse?) and I will also have to tell the doctor. But I comply.

Next I am taken to a smaller room and told to take a seat; that the doctor will be in "shortly." We all know what that means. Nurse person leaves and shuts the door. The room is stark white, one framed photo of a wheat field, an exam table covered in the ever-present, crisp see-through tissue paper and another computer on a desk against the wall. There are no windows, and after 20 minutes, I open the door because I am feeling really trapped. Nurse person walks by and attempts to close the door. I stop her, ready to twist her arm behind her back if she gives me any flak.

"I really want it open, please." She walks away, and I call after her, "How much longer?" She ignores me.

The doctor eventually arrives, but he is not the doctor—well, sort of—he is an intern who is obviously getting his practice time in, which I don't mind expect that I know I will once again

have to explain why I am here today. He starts typing into the computer (isn't the information already there?). He says the doctor will be in shortly and leaves.

The doctor does finally arrive in his starched white coat and extends a welcoming handshake. "What brings you in here today?"

I am a hamster on the wheel of no return, and sadly, so is he.

Author Bio: Bio:Sue Mayfield Geiger writes and edits for regional and national publications, and lives on the Texas Gulf Coast. Her first book of prose and verse (with photos) is now available. www.gibbonsstreet.com. You can email comments to her at: SMG