



## Commentaries

### The Admiral and the General

**The Admiral and The General never met,** nor could they. The Admiral was really a Vice Admiral and the General wasn't a person.

I was a medical intern at Mt Sinai Hospital in Manhattan. I spent my first few months on the ward service, taking care of "average" people, "regular citizens" with Blue Cross, or poor people who had Medicaid or were uninsured, but Mt Sinai also cared for the New York City elite, rich, famous, celebrities; and when I moved from the ward service to the "semi private" service, which was for wealthy patients who were ill, in contrast to the private service, which was for wealthy patients who were not ill enough to have to suffer the inconveniences of housestaff care, I expected to meet an occasional celebrity. In this context I was reviewing the charts of my new patients, and I asked a fellow intern, who had been and was staying on the service, about Mr. Smith. "Oh, you mean the Vice Admiral?" "I don't know. I'm just picking him up. Was he a vice admiral?" "He's still active. He's a vice admiral in the Starfleet Command." Mr. Smith was very demented and unable to distinguish one galaxy from another.

The General is a place. Probably hallowed by some readers of this column, but probably not by most. Several years ago I worked with someone who, at conferences, would rarely refrain from, "at the General we did...." I was peeved. Occasionally I'd hear a reference to some other hallowed institution. "At Sloan-Kettering....," "at The Mayo...." The references to "The General" had irritated me. I did not train there and at the time I trained, we had thought their neurology program quite good, almost at our own level, but not quite, so that hearing references to that place as if it were the Mecca of neurology, was jarring, and, to be honest, a little upsetting since it suggested that this person considered it the topmost point

in the pyramid, whereas my colleagues and I did not. In fact, in those days, there was one top place, and it was at Queen's Square, in London. We thought we were the next best place. I guess that a lot of places thought they were the next best place.

I still hear, from time to time, reverential references to these places in local conferences. Doctors sometimes cite their experiences with the famous, as well. I have come to feel a bit sorry for my colleagues who feel the need to toss out the names of distant colleagues, usually on a first name basis, and places they've been. "When I was at Mecca we did it this way." "Jim Famous used to say..." I'm not sure if this is meant to convey the feeling that the rest of us are lucky to have any acolyte of those programs, one step closer to heaven than the rest of us, or is meant to say that the person is so unsure of himself that he wants everyone to know that his training was top notch so that what he says must be important.

I think these references are different from those referring to "the days of the giants" I can't recall my colleagues talking about bygone days in fond terms. When my physician-daughter complains about her night on call, I never talk about what nights on call used to be like. We often marvel at the differences in decision making now compared to the old days. "What did the CAT scan show," instead of, "how did you make the decision to do....?" "So and so used to teach that..." but modern imaging or clinical trials have dispelled those theories. Time marches on, and, hopefully wisdom accrues.

I don't think it's wrong to quote the teachings of famous experts, or to describe a standardized approach taken at a distinguished center. The irritant lies in how that information is conveyed, and whether the intent is to convey clinically relevant information or to impress the listener.



The Admiral wasn't a real person and The General was neither a person nor a real place. Both represent a state of mind, in the former case a deteriorated state, a display of the force of entropy slouching towards chaos. Although I used to find references to "the General," "The Mayo", and other famous places annoying, I now find them sad. They represent an inability of speakers to separate from their last place of stature. Perhaps that's why they are annoying, that they talk as if they are now at a lesser place, and since you're there listening to them, you, too, are at a lesser place. They feel the need to cling to a reputation that they feel defines them, like some old man saying, "when I played for the Yankees." They have failed to move on because they feel they have actually failed, because, for some reason, they did move on, unable to take the road not taken.

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#### Disclosure of Financial Interests

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Conflicts: In addition to the potential conflicts posed by my ties to industry that are listed, during the years 2001-2009 I was a paid consultant for: Eli Lilly, Bristol Myers Squibb, Janssen, Ovation, Pfizer, makers of each of the atypicals in use or being tested.