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Why Can't Docs Be More Like Dogs?

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I was sitting in the doctor's office -- 20 minutes early for an appointment that would be a half hour late -- thumbing through a six-month old magazine, when I came across an article on the amazing things being done with service dogs.

And as I read about how these fantastic animals are changing and saving lives it occurred to me that these canine helpers have a lot to teach the medical establishment.

At the time I was not exactly a fan of said establishment. I was waiting to see a third dermatologist about a problem two dermatologists couldn't agree that I had.

I had used a cosmetic scrub -- very nice, it smelled like brown sugar. Then I used a sun block. Then I developed a nasty rash. Then the glands on the side of my neck turned into big red itchy lumps. My throat burned, and I had trouble swallowing. Prescription: steroid crème.

After a notable lack of improvement, I went to dermatologist number two, who said the crème for what I had was like telling someone with a brain tumor to take two aspirin. Big confidence builder, to say the least. Prescription: continue with the crème, but also add ingestible steroids.

I asked number two if there was any connection between my problem and the sun block I had used. The rapid-fire response was "No" and "impossible." My still-swollen glands, she said, were simply a consequence of the skin condition.

So, with visions of getting arms like Barry Bonds, I was off to the pharmacy for more steroids, noticing on the way out that the sun block I had used was for sale in the dermatologist's office.

Feeling worse by the day, I tried dermatologist number three, who said the sun block in combination with the scrub could, indeed, cause my reaction. But -- again -- the gland problem was likely a consequence of the skin problem.

By this time the sides of my neck looked like my body had been invaded by an alien life form. So I went to an internist, who finally -- and correctly -- deduced that the gland problem was being caused by a nasty upper respiratory infection. As for the dermatitis, he said "I can refer you to a dermatologist for that."

I know doctors save lives. I know articles like this get your face posted in the break rooms of medical offices across the country. But I still can't help thinking about service dogs.

There are dogs trained to alert the deaf when the phone rings, help unfreeze Parkinson's victims with the stimulating touch of a paw, turn on lights and pick up dropped objects for the paralyzed.

Some amazing work is being done to train dogs to alert owners to impending health problems. Seizure dogs can recognize a change in body chemistry 15 to 45 minutes before the onset of an epileptic seizure. Dogs are being trained to recognize low blood sugar in diabetics -- even awakening from a sound sleep to, in turn, wake up the owner. I know of one family where one trained dog shuttles constantly between two diabetic children.

The difference between these dogs and doctors -- besides medical school, internships, residencies, proud parents and opposable thumbs -- is total and absolute concentration on the patient. For service dogs, it's what they do, why they're here, how they're trained. Their role in life is not about treatments. It's about outcomes.

I know that is a lot to ask of doctors in a world where medicine is a business and third party payers make the rules. Still, thinking back on my needless ordeals, these wonderful animals have something to share.