

In Sickness | December 1, 2016

MORE THAN \$1,000

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In Salem, Oregon, there's a restaurant I'm fond of called Marco Polo. It's on the south side of downtown. The nice side.

After one of my lunches there, the waiter dropped off the bill, along with a couple of fortune cookies, and, without looking at me, said, "Here are your fortune cookies and stuff."

I could tell this was his first day on the job because he had no idea how to discuss money, which is the whole point of the establishment. It's not a soup kitchen.

Half an hour before, when I ordered my Kung Pao mystery meat, I didn't think it would be free. So what was he afraid of? How did he think I would respond if he simply said, "Here's your bill."

"What do you mean *bill*? I'm not paying for this! I thought the Szechuan dishes were complimentary!"

That was years ago. And I still find his embarrassment cute.

Today, almost a decade later, I went to Walgreens in Stockton, California. I'm not fond of their pharmacy, but that's where my prescription of albendazole was sent.

The latest diagnosis is wuchereria, a parasitic infection that causes lymphatic filariasis. And these pills kill the newly born larvae.

After waiting in line for half an hour, I finally approached the counter.

"Hi, I'm here to pick up a prescription?" I phrased it like a question.

The pharmacy technician responded with a series of questions, phrased as statements:

"Name. What's your address. Date of birth." And then she stated, "What drug are you picking up today?"

"Albendazole."

She didn't respond. Or look at me. She just stood there, staring into the computer monitor, occasionally plucking something into the keyboard.

After a minute or two, without looking up, she said, “It doesn’t look like it’s covered by your insurance, and it’s more than \$1,000.”

I didn’t respond immediately. I spent about twenty seconds silently processing that information. And calculating my budget, deciding if it was an expense I could afford.

My health is way more important than a week’s salary, I decided. But it depends what “more than \$1,000” means. I only have about \$1,500 in my bank account. So I asked:

“How much over \$1,000 is it? I mean, if it’s like \$1,060, I’m just going to pay for it.”

She paused, typed some more, still didn’t look up, and then said, “It’s over \$16,000.”

“Okay.” That’s all the response I could muster. Because I hadn’t mentally prepared for a number like that. I just stood there, silent, crunching no numbers, staring blankly at her as she continued to stare pointlessly into the computer screen.

“What am I supposed to do?”, I wondered... and may have accidentally said out loud. If it’s a medication I need, how do I get it? I own \$1,500. And it’s not like I have a secret collection of fancy jewelry I can auction off. I don’t even own a car. Or a bike... anymore. It was stolen. If I had an estate sale (at my almost-500-square-foot apartment) I might be able to double my net worth... leaving me \$13,000 short. *At least* \$13,000. I still don’t know how much *over* \$16,000 it is. Again: what am I supposed to do?

As I wondered (and potentially whispered) those words, I realized the line behind me was longer than it was when I arrived. So I looked into the lady’s downcast eyes and said, “I’m going to have to consider some other options.” And I left.

On my way out, I thought about Marco Polo.

“Here are your fortune cookies and stuff.”

Clearly, he felt uncomfortable. “This food only costs a dollar to make and you’re being charged twenty. Can I maybe bring you a bunch more fortune cookies or something? I feel guilty.”

That was nearly adorable. But “over \$1,000” isn’t. Because it’s not an appetite that’s on the line. It’s my health. So there’s nothing cute about awkward, imprecise, and altogether misleading communication. “Over \$1,000.”

Imagine if a sport commentator said something that absurd: “Denver Nuggets re-sign four-time MVP for record-breaking contract: more than a million dollars for three years.” Or maybe: “The average height of an NBA player is over a foot tall.”

Sentences like this provide no useful information. And those who lack the social skills necessary to communicate more clearly are not eligible for careers in sport broadcasting or journalism. Yet, compared to healthcare, professional sports are of little importance.

For those of us willing to plumb the discomforts of honesty, we can appreciate professional athletics for what it is: a bunch of adults playing with balls. Neither valuable nor interesting to the grownups who grew up. Deep down, I think even the fans themselves realize that, which is the reason they have to cheer so loud and hard. If they stopped treading water so fiercely one game night, they would risk sinking into that contemplative depth that fully drowns their childish devotion.

Despite this, professional sport maintains a standard of excellence in its labor force unmatched by any field or branch of medicine.

When was the last time a basketball coach was too frightened to look a player in the eye? Or a football referee gave an inaudible, asthmatic puff into the whistle?

Professions with integrity and self-respect would never stand for that. So why is it my experience at the pharmacy? Every customer who approaches the counter is frightened, in pain, vulnerable. It's stressful enough to declare your prescriptions out loud, exactly three steps in front of the long, linear audience you just emigrated from. It only makes it worse when the stranger you're addressing cannot even look at you.

"Here are your drugs and stuff."

You could at least put a fortune cookie in the pill bag.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Carter'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a large initial 'C' and a long, sweeping tail.