

Opinion: Barton saves author's life

To the community,

A huge shout-out of thanks to the people of Barton Hospital.

In my line of work I occasionally get to save the life of a fictional character. Always a good thing, but no big deal. Last week I witnessed how it's done in the real world. I was interested because the life they were trying to save was mine.

Here's how it went down.



Todd Borg

April 6 – Shortly after breakfast I felt a sudden sore throat coming on. By mid-afternoon, my throat was in lockdown. No food and no water would move past the gates except under extreme duress. I wasn't happy about it, but I'd had severe sore throats several times over the decades. I knew it just took time.

April 7 – Tried the usual, hot tea, lots of sleep time, all without effect.

April 8 – Woke up to discover that the right side of my neck was swollen like the Pillsbury Doughboy. Left side still looked normal. I realized this wasn't just another severe sore throat. What were my options? Go to the ER, or try to make some poor doctor abandon holiday plans, neither very

attractive. I'm loathe to make a fuss if it can possibly wait until normal hours. I decided I'd go in first thing in the morning.

April 9th – Visited Tahoe Urgent Care where Dr. Henning Mehrens took one look at me and said I had to immediately visit an ear, nose, and throat specialist. He got on the phone and found that Dr. Ronald Roth would see me an hour later.

I went down the street to Dr. Roth's office. He took one look at me and said that he was going to admit me to the hospital and put me on antibiotic IV, and after several hours on the IV, they would do a CAT scan and additional chest X-rays, and when he found what he knew he'd find – a deep-neck abscess – he'd do surgery in the morning.

"I, uh ...," I fumbled in shock. "Let me talk this over with my wife and"

"No," he said. "You don't have time to talk this over. You have to go now."

Dr. Roth gave me one of those looks that, while pleasant, are designed to communicate that some parts of life allow for chat and discussion, maybe over a glass of wine. But in other parts of life, there are black-and-white decisions based on hard science, no room for emotion. A deadly enemy had taken up a commanding position in my neck and my survival required application of a number of measures, time-sensitive, focused, and coordinated.

The rest of that day is a blur of pain and misery. Add to the pain a dehydration level I'd never experienced, and I was ready to be done with this life. They wheeled me around the hospital getting the various scans, which revealed what Dr. Roth expected. I had a large abscess just outside of the windpipe.

By the time they brought me into the OR, my mental perceptions

were gone. I was a blob of protoplasm with a rapid, shallow heartbeat, nothing more.

An hour later, I was awake in recovery, my major pain hugely reduced, a result almost too astonishing to believe.

Over the following hours, I learned that Dr. Roth had gone in through my mouth, tunneled down and sucked the guts out of the abscess, an impressive feat by any measure. (Later research has taught me about the odds of surviving deep-neck abscesses. Not very good unless you get the exact right treatment. Even with the correct treatment, one's chances remain unsure.)

As I've thought back on my time at Barton, I've revisited all of the different components necessary to make a hospital work so smoothly. Nurses and nurses' assistants and countless other support staff, all putting together a seamless whole. It is a hugely complicated network, all of these interrelated health professionals.

My only previous surgery was at a big-name, big-city hospital in a city with a world-famous medical university. How does Barton compare? More professional in every way. Much more focused on basic quality care. Less self-important. At every step I felt that Barton's doctors and nurses simply wanted to give me the best care they could. Dealing with the big-city hospital was like trying to communicate with a giant robot. But real medicine takes place between two individuals, a sick patient and a caregiver who is genuinely focused on the patient. Barton beats the big-city hospital hands down.

I come away with many snapshots: Dr. Roth and his frank assessment of what was needed to survive a life-threatening disease, followed by his laser-accurate ability to orchestrate a search-and-destroy mission in the mysterious caverns of a person's neck. Dr. Mehrens coming in morning and night to check on me and answer questions. Kinder, warmer docs they don't make. The large nursing staff that doted on me. Yes, my

health threat had an “impeded airway” issue to it, which made them pay extra attention. But that wasn’t what made them all feel like friends after a first visit. The CAT scan and X-ray staff, the OR specialists. These are the people behind the scenes. Yet each one of them treated me as warmly as the front-line nurses.

So, Barton Hospital staff, here is a love letter to all of you. I am deeply grateful and indebted to you. I will never forget your help, your attentions, your caring.

Oh, yeah, you also saved my life. No small thing, that.

Todd Borg, Meyers

P.S. If you, dear reader, know people who work at Barton, please consider forwarding this to them. I have no way to contact all of the Barton staff, and I wish to thank them all.