

HEALTH

A Night in the Emergency Room

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PERSONAL REPORT

As a medical writer, I've heard many stories about Northwest Texas Hospital's emergency room.

Sunday night I set out to discover for myself the truth behind Amarillo Emergency Receiving Center's doors. I must admit, however, my trip to the emergency room was not totally altruistic. I was not a reporter incognito. I was a patient in pain.

Sunday afternoon, after taking skiing lessons the previous day, I decided to try the Highway, a run on the backside of the mountain at Angel Fire.

My ski instructor, John, thought I was ready. (He said I had courage).

My husband, Lloyd, thought I was ready. (He said he was lonely skiing by himself).

And I, after running into a sign warning skiers to slow down, thought I was ready.

Truth be told, I was tired of falling on the bunny slope. I wanted to ride the big persons' lift to the top of the hill. After all, I wasn't a beginner any more. I had skied two hours on Saturday. Sunday I was — well — an intermediate. So let me at those lofty slopes.

By the time I reached the bottom of the mountain, I was an avid skier. I loved the sport and the sport loved me. The love affair, however, ended on the last run quaintly called Heading Home.

Heck, I wasn't going home as planned after this run. I wasn't even going to the bottom of the mountain

on my own two feet. I went on the back of a first-aid snowmobile.

When they see me wobble with my splint and crutches, people ask, "How did it happen?"

Heading Home was an easy slope. And I wanted to show just how easy it was as I descended one of the few steep hills on the run. I wanted to ski down with style.

NEWS FLASH! I can't ski. I sure can tumble, though. And I did — several times. The last time, when the stubborn binding refused to release, the ski went left, my knee went right and something snapped.

That was noon Sunday. By midnight I was leaving Amarillo's emergency room. Given the alternative of traveling to Santa Fe or Taos for X-rays, I opted to drive the five-hour trip home. I made a wise choice.

Not once during my 2½-hour visit at Northwest Texas Hospital did I see even a glimmer of a knife blade. Not one person in the sparsely populated room raised his voice — not even the little girl with the 104-degree temperature suffering from the flu.

The minute I hobbled through the front doors, a nurse brought me a wheelchair.

During the next hour, I was treated by five people. In this short time I learned an important medical theorem: the quality of care is directly proportionate to the care

giver's view of skiing.

The first person to attend to me was a pre-med student three months away from graduation. He also was an avid skier who had seen his share of skiing injuries.

After five minutes under his care I was convinced West Texas State University ought to give the man his degree at that moment.

The nurse who followed him needs to return for a refresher course in compassion. She hated skiing, she announced as she pulled off my shoe. I cried in pain.

"Oh," she said. "Still a bit tender, huh?"

By the time the doctor arrived, my composure consisted of a tear-drenched face and choked voice.

Dr. Charles Allison, the attending physician and a skier, could have written the book on compassion. Though he did not offer me the tissue box that was just out of my reach, he did offer his hand the minute he walked through the curtain. After a brief examination, he sent me to radiology to get an X-ray.

The NWTH technician never asked me to lift a finger — or a foot. She moved the machine to me. And once, when she left me alone for less than three minutes, she returned to tell me she would be back shortly. I never asked her, but I'm certain she also skied.

The only instance I had to wait for an inordinate amount time was

after I was discharged. The nurse, who first put me into the wheelchair when I arrived, assisted me into the car where she told me to wait until my pain pills arrived from the pharmacy.

More than a half hour later, the pills still had not arrived. Apparently, we had caught the pharmacists during a shift change, she explained to my mild-mannered husband after he left the car agitated and began to uncharacteristically pace the emergency room's floor.

Once we drove away, with the pills in hand, I finally had a chance to peer at my bill. My chat with the doctor cost \$35. My emergency room visit cost \$36.25. The two pictures of my knee, not even in color, cost \$44.50.

The clincher were the crutches and Zimmer brace. I don't know who Mr. Zimmer is, but I suspect he is rich because I paid \$65.25 for his washable splint. The crutches were \$37.50 apiece. And I need two crutches to wobble in style.

I apparently have a bone contusion and a strained ligament. The condition, my doctor assured me, is not enough to keep me off the slopes in a month.

But that diagnosis is only good for one week. In a week, if I am not walking on my own, the doctor said it might be something more serious. I didn't need any elaboration. He was secretly telling me I might not see the slippery slopes this winter. I don't even want to think about it.