

Don-ze-pill

Rebecca Grossman-Kahn, MD

Dr. Grossman-Kahn is a 2019 graduate of the Medical School University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI. Her essay received third place in the Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Medical Society 2019 Helen H. Glaser Student Essay Award.

“I’m glad you made it,” the clinic assistant spoke loudly, overly accentuating her words as she walked the couple to an exam room. They were 30 minutes late. Again. They’d had to reschedule this appointment once already because they had not left enough time to park and find the waiting room.

Why did the hospital insist on construction projects and detours that left them all turned around? They were thankful they would still be seen at all, even if the visit would be cut short.

After a beige maze of hallways, a young woman and man were waiting for them in an office. Neither wore white coats. The man had thick black hair and a bow tie. He gestured for the couple to sit down. He smiled broadly, leaned in over his clipboard, and shouted, “What can we do for you today?”

Goodness, it was only Don who wore hearing aids. Oh, she should have brought them to the appointment. How could she have forgotten them? So important to hear what the doctors are saying. She was so glad the treatments for Don’s prostate cancer seemed to be working.

“You really had us worried there for a while, but we did receive the phone call, thank you so much for calling, we were so pleased that the latest scan showed Don is cancer free-now. What is the next step?”

The young male doctor answered, “Your cancer doctors will talk to you about that. This appointment is to talk about something else. Do you remember why this appointment was made?”

Don smiled and looked at his wife. Oh dear, had she mixed up the urologist with the dermatologist, again? Why were they always cruelly testing her like this? She couldn’t rely on Don anymore, so she was keeping track of her own appointments in addition to his; they couldn’t possibly know how difficult it is. Now, did he have a blood draw this afternoon as well?

“Don, this appointment was made because you’ve been having difficulty remembering things. We think you have dementia, probably Alzheimer’s disease; has anyone said those words to you? We want to make sure we aren’t missing any other cause of your memory loss. How have you been doing in regards to your memory recently?”

“Oh, I’m fine. There’s nothing wrong with me,” said Don. “The one who needs the doctor is this goose sitting next to me.”

The young doctor watched the patient’s wife slide a

centimeter farther into the clinic chair. She hadn’t taken off her red wool winter coat. She wore purple ballet flats with a row of round buttons marching down the sides of her feet. They were tattered, with wispy threads, and the sole separating from the decorative fabric. She pursed her lips and looked at the floor. She remembered how just the other day Don had remarked, “I think I’ve lost my mind,” with the nonchalance as if he’d misplaced his keys.

Don couldn’t remember their grandchildren’s names anymore, but she was managing him all right at home. Sometimes their daughter, Allison, would come over and take him out on long drives. She took him to the zoo to eat sandwiches cut into flamingo shapes. By the time they arrived back home and took off their coats, he would march into the living room where she was folding napkins and say, “Don’t you think it’s time to go?”

He always wanted to go. To go eat, to go for a walk, to get out of the house.

The doctor shifted his attention from Don to her. “Is he having any difficulty bathing, dressing himself, feeding himself?” Perhaps they had noticed the few crumbs wedged into the depths of his beard.

“Oh no. Nothing like that.” She made him breakfast every morning, a bona fide three-course meal of fruit, cereal, and English muffin. Today, the fruit was grapefruit cut in halves. He peered into its middle and lifted it up, with glistening pockets of juice, for her to see. “It’s a big one!” he laughed. He found the sugar on the table and covered the grapefruit with two heaping spoonfuls, then another.

“Honey, I think you have enough sugar on there,” she remarked.

“Absolutely not. How could you suggest such a thing?” he retorted, adding another scoopful. A little extra sugar never hurt anyone, she told herself. And anyhow, he deserves to enjoy an indulgent breakfast at his age.

“Has he ever become aggressive with you?” The young woman tilted her head and looked expectantly at Suzanne.

Suzanne thought back to their walk yesterday, when Don threatened a neighbor. For some reason he had seemed agitated by the neighbor’s friendly banter.

“Don’t you dare smile again,” Don snarled at the neighbor. “Smile again and I’ll shoot you.”

The neighbor burst into chuckles, thinking Don was deadpanning. He clapped Don on the back and said, “Now that’s a good one. You really had me there for a second.” Suzanne smiled weakly and grabbed Don’s elbow to continue their walk.

“Has he ever tried to hurt you? Become confused and left the house without you knowing?” the woman, a social worker, gently prodded.

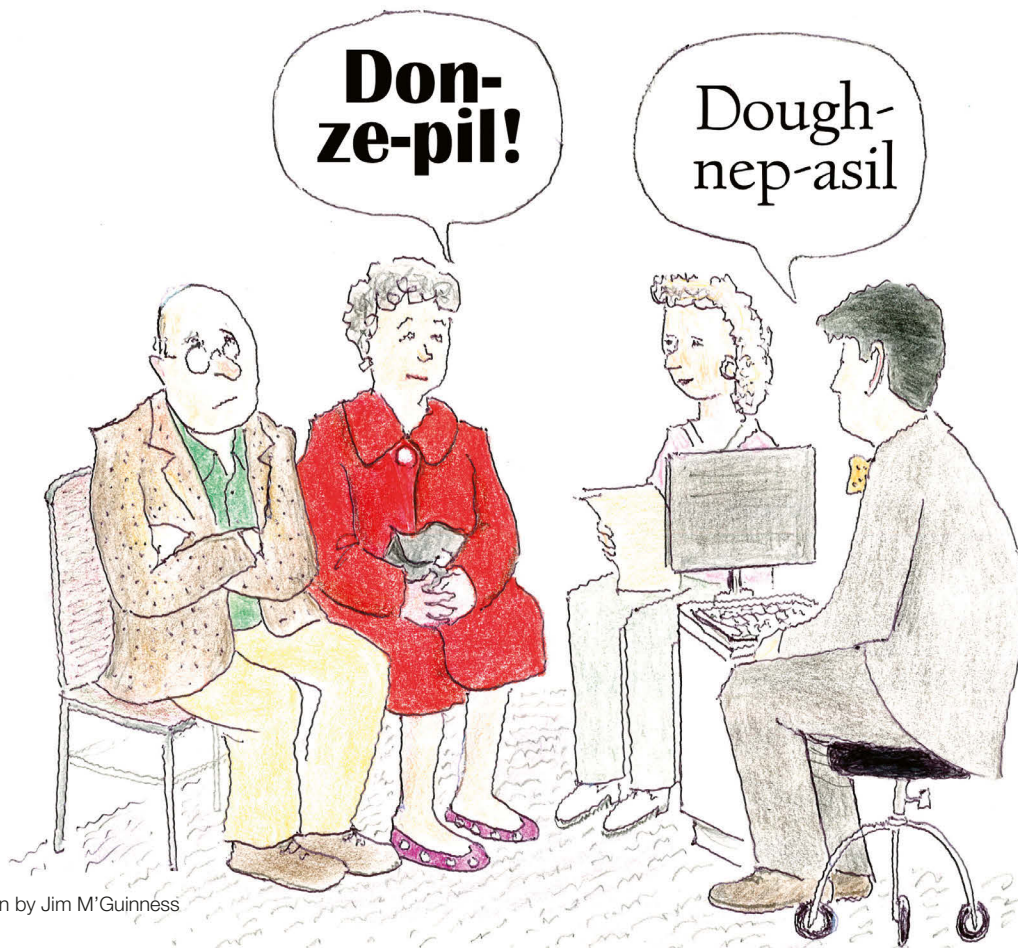


Illustration by Jim M'Guinness

Suzanne started to see that this appointment was a test. She wasn't dumb. By her age, half of her church group had been through it. She had seen it all. Her friend Penny had been taken away to a nursing home too far away for her husband to visit. And friends Peter and Wilma spent the funds meant for their grandson's college on hiring in-home help. Can you imagine? After all those years of feeding your children, suddenly having to feed your husband?

Suzanne got all the medical education she needed through her church group.

No wonder they hadn't told her what this appointment was about. The medical profession wanted to take Don away from her.

"This is all such a shock," Suzanne told the interviewers.

The resident and social worker exchanged a glance. They explained that the changes in Don had been accumulating for years. At his last visit, the note said Don described his symptoms as "flingle flangle."

"I'm scared," Suzanne explained. "How would you feel if you were losing something and you weren't ready? I know they're going to take him away from me."

Suzanne had already thought about how her tremor might interfere with feeding Don. If they asked about that, she would say that Allison would help more as it gets worse. They couldn't know. They didn't see how she cared for him when he had pneumonia. How she nudged him to do his physical therapy leg lifts, rewarding him with a kiss for each effort.

Next they wanted to talk about Don's medication. The resident was hoping to conclude the interview quickly, wary about his time management.

"Is he taking the donepezil?" He emphasized the second syllable—dough-nep-asil.

"No, it's Don-ze-pill," Suzanne corrected him. Wasn't it funny the medication had his name in it? It reminded her of her friend Rose who lived on Rose street.

"Don, anything at all you think we've missed?" The man was poised on the edge of his seat, about to stand up.

Don smiled. "You've done a wonderful job."

As the resident and social worker left the room, they joked in a whisper to each other, "I'm not sure which of them is the patient." "Can we add her to the clinic schedule?"

Eventually another woman came in.

"I understand he's been on dough-nep-asil," she said by way of introduction. She knew this visit had been a "hot mess," in the social worker's words. The social worker would follow up with the couple, as this was not a case for the medical team.

"No, he is taking DON-ze-pill," Suzanne corrected her.

The older women ended the visit, instructed someone to enter the prescription into a computer, and shepherded them out of the room, back into the beige maze.

Forget the blood draw. This day had already been enough. And where on earth did they park the car?

The author's E-mail address is rebeccagk@gmail.com.