

Morning rounds; Drilling for blood; Falx; Sciatica

Thomas Mampalam, MD

Neurology® 2018;90:381-383. doi:10.1212/WNL.0000000000004993

Correspondence

Dr. Mampalam
tjmampalam@aol.com

Morning rounds

I carry a list on morning rounds.
Beside the name of each patient
who goes home, I place a cross
and for those who remain, a box.
I like crosses better than boxes.

A cross for a motorcyclist who
jackknifed into a power pole last week.
A single burr hole, complete recovery.

Another cross for a mother of five.
She feared cancer, but her tumor was benign.
She has newfound joy to be alive.

A box for an old man without family,
who waits for a hospice bed.
Deadly glioblastoma multiforme.

A definite cross, a truck driver free
of sciatica. He plans to retire
and embark on a cruise to Alaska.

A box for an old woman who knows
her time has come. A plum-sized tumor
grows in her cerebellum.

A last box for a man who is paralyzed.
Tumor strangles his spinal cord.
Lung cancer widely metastasized.

Three crossed off the morning list.
Three remain interred in open boxes,
waiting for grass to cover their names,
waiting for their crosses.

Drilling for blood

If you must drill a hole in someone's skull
to relieve pressure from expanding blood,
then hold the drill shaft straight and firm
at right angle to the calvarium.

You will not slip or plunge if
you hold steady with the bit.

MORE ONLINE

Audio

Listen to Dr. Mampalam
read this poem.

NPub.org/3kdhd3

You got a midnight call:
a young man lost control,
crashed his motorcycle into a pole,
comatose with left pupil blown.

In front of his ear, make a vertical cut.
Retract the scalp, expose the temporal bone.
Make sure the drill is at top speed,
press it tight against the stone.

There will be a slight tremble in the drill
as it catches against the inner table.
Use a curette on the thin residual.
One step remains, cut the dura mater.

Under pressure, dark red clot oozes out
like the soft center of a cherry chocolate.

You will not slip or plunge if
you hold steady with the bit.

Falx

The turban bandage, a cloud on her head,
hides a scar that arcs from ear to ear.
She neglects her left-sided weakness and smiles.
“Was it cancer?” is her fear.

When I raised the bone flap, blood spurted like
a purple flame tossed up from the largest vein.
Two stitches stanching the flow but three liters lost.
Would the repair hold? Or would she bleed again?

I descended the vertical face of the falx
to a dim chamber beneath the sickle.
Three red rivers converged where I dared not cross.
Time to turn back before the world was lost.

In Mesopotamia, I glimpsed the threatening form
whose flesh was soft, gray, and cruciferous.
Further south, I hunted and found a bloodless plane
beneath which glistened a paler terrain.

Finally, in that dark cavern below the falx
there was no angelic echo before a storm,
only gently pulsating, sterile absence
of the dark and bloodied form.

I ascended to tell the story but need not tell all.
There is only one detail she wants to hear.
All the rest is mere embellishment.
“Was it cancer?” is her fear.

The tumor was benign, not cancer.
That is all she needs for now as answer.
You will live to a wrinkled old age, I say.
Your nurse will help you walk later today.

Sciatica

Three months ago, he stopped his truck route
through the dusty Central Valley towns.
Electric shocks coursed down his thighs.
A disc herniation pinched a nerve root.

Yesterday, veins draped the disc like wild vines.
With a blunt tipped probe, I expanded
a tear in the ligament and then,
with a grasper, gently tugged and twisted
the fragment, like a gnarled carrot
dug out of a vegetable garden,
like a trophy to hold up high.

On morning rounds, he is free of sciatica.
He talks about a spring trip to Alaska.
From the window, we look across
the bridge toward the cruise terminal.
After I change his surgical dressing,
we chat about the Inside Passage.

I recall my family's trip six years ago:
the orcas stalking the sea lions,
the nesting eagles in the cedar trees
and the ancient Hubbard glacier
with blue fractal cliffs calving
massive iceberg shards crashing
into the ever pounding ocean spraying
up like a fountain from below.

Neurology®

Morning rounds; Drilling for blood; Falx; Sciatica

Thomas Mampalam

Neurology 2018;90;381-383

DOI 10.1212/WNL.0000000000004993

This information is current as of February 19, 2018

Updated Information & Services	including high resolution figures, can be found at: http://n.neurology.org/content/90/8/381.full
Subspecialty Collections	This article, along with others on similar topics, appears in the following collection(s): All Clinical Neurology http://n.neurology.org/cgi/collection/all_clinical_neurology All Oncology http://n.neurology.org/cgi/collection/all_oncology
Permissions & Licensing	Information about reproducing this article in parts (figures, tables) or in its entirety can be found online at: http://www.neurology.org/about/about_the_journal#permissions
Reprints	Information about ordering reprints can be found online: http://n.neurology.org/subscribers/advertise

Neurology® is the official journal of the American Academy of Neurology. Published continuously since 1951, it is now a weekly with 48 issues per year. Copyright © 2018 American Academy of Neurology. All rights reserved. Print ISSN: 0028-3878. Online ISSN: 1526-632X.

