

A Medical Incident

by Diane Holman

I want the community to know this story, because something similar could happen to any of us anytime.

I feel like a schoolchild cutting classes. My physical therapist Jennifer told me yesterday that I needed to spend one hour a day with my right leg elevated, to "defy gravity" and—hopefully—to reduce the swelling in my joints.

An hour of doing nothing but listening to music! *Tarea dulce*. Listening now to Eros Ramazzotti, I allow my spirits to expand with his words.

La noche es casi perfecta

disfrutaremos la vida los dos

porque estamos buscando amor

y él no espera....

But to begin at the beginning. Friday night, July 20, I stood up from my chair on the deck to fetch something from the kitchen, and my femur fractured. I fell to the ground, in pain. All I could think of was getting myself into bed. I remember crawling—more or less—down the hall and into the bedroom and then—with an upper-body strength I did not know I possessed—heaving myself into bed.

I think I slept some—whenever I lay completely still. Finally daylight came and I called the Macdonalds'. Fred answered. "I fell," I said. "I need help."

Linda and Fred were at my house in ten minutes. Fred called the ambulance service we subscribe to — *Linea Vital de C.R.*—and Linda packed a bag for the hospital. "I don't think you'll be coming home tonight," she said, somewhat to my surprise.

Jorge arrived with the ambulance in 15 minutes. He was able to start a morphine drip to alleviate the pain. Off we sped to CIMA Hospital.

The orthopedic surgeon on call in the emergency room was Dr. Carols Argüello, the surgeon who had operated on my left knee and who had removed my bunion. We were pleased—albeit within context—to see each other.

Dr. Argüello took an x-ray, told me I had a fractured femur and said that what he was going to do was put in a prosthetic to replace my femur and my right hip joint. Apparently the osteoporosis in my hip joint—which I did not know I had—had "gnawed away" at the femur, causing it, in that one exquisite moment of pressure, to fracture.

I was wheeled to my hospital room to await surgery, set for 7:00 p.m. Although I had a morphine drip throughout the day, I fairly frequently experienced serious pain.

Finally 7:00 p.m. arrived. I lay alone outside the operating room, experiencing a calmness and stoicism that, even allowing for the attenuating effect of the morphine, I had to admire in myself.

Sunday morning I awoke in my hospital room with no pain. From that time on, I was able to progress, from totally bed-ridden to somewhat mobile (with a walker), from bedpan to toilet.

The nursing staff at CIMA was exceptional. Each nurse and assistant nurse responded to me with good humor, punctuality and respect. (They frequently told me I was "*valiente*".) The medical services were also excellent. I spent six nights in the hospital. The total bill—for the surgery and for the hospital stay--was approximately \$10,000. (Because I have the supplemental "Plan 16" INS insurance, I only had to pay 20% of my hospital costs.)

I am most grateful to *Linea Vital* ambulance service. If I did not have the service, I (or Fred) would have had to call *Cruz Roja* and tell them—in Spanish—what had happened to me and why I needed an ambulance and—perhaps most difficult of all—explain to them where I was located. Jorge from *Linea Vital* had already been to my home. Shortly after I signed up for the service, he came out with the ambulance to appraise access to my house, meet my dogs, etc.

There also would have been no guarantee to prompt access to an ambulance if I had had to call *Cruz Roja*. If their ambulance was already in use, I would have had to wait my turn.

Because of *Linea Vital*, I had an ambulance available within minutes, and a skilled paramedic who got me on a stretcher with as little pain as possible. Jorge called ahead to CIMA Hospital and told them I was on my way. He also got authorization to start a morphine drip. Jorge called additional personnel from *Linea Vital*, a woman who arrived at my house almost immediately, it seemed. She monitored me in the ambulance while Jorge drove to CIMA. At CIMA Jorge turned me over to Dr. Argüello.

I believe *Linea Vital* was the important first step in what appears to have been a successful intervention in a medical emergency.

The booklet Dr. Argüello gave me on hip joint replacement tells me that the surgical procedure in itself is a serious one and that I now face—with a prosthesis—a life-changing challenge. I have to learn to walk on my own again. I have to learn the rules about what I can and cannot do with a prosthesis.

A challenge. Always before a challenge has been--on balance—a good thing for me. At 22, taking my first baby home from the hospital. (I was clueless) At 34, sitting in my first law school class, not knowing who was the plaintiff and who was the defendant. At 45, divorcing and beginning to live alone for the first time in my life. At 62, moving to my new home in Costa Rica, not knowing any Spanish.

So: a challenge. Good