

BURDA ON HEALTHCARE

Comedy Can Outweigh Drama in Hospital ERs

By David Burda
March 11, 2025



I've spent a lot of time in hospital emergency rooms lately. (I still say emergency rooms, not "emergency departments.") During one visit, something made me realize that the dynamic in hospital ERs is more like a sitcom than a drama like *St. Elsewhere*, *Chicago Hope*, *ER*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *The Resident*, *New Amsterdam* and, most recently, *The Pitt*.

BURDA? TWO!

I was sitting in the ER waiting room with about 40 or more patients and family members when a person walked in and asked the registration desk how long the wait was. Registration told the potential patient the wait was four and a half hours. The potential patient groaned, and the person at registration said, "That's not bad. The wait later is going to be nine or 10 hours." The potential patient left to an unknown fate.

Hearing that the wait was going to be more than four hours, a father and son, approximate ages of 55 and 25, respectively, looked at each other, and said simultaneously, "Let's go to urgent care." I'm not sure who was the patient and who was the family member. I'm guessing they had been there at least an hour or so. They got up and walked out the door, also to an unknown fate.

Less than 30 seconds later, the triage nurse came out and called their names. I'm guessing the registration desk has told *them* that it would be about two hours. But in the hour after they arrived, the wait time for new arrivals jumped to four and a half hours. Unfortunately, after overhearing what registration said to the new arrival, they walked out to take their chances at urgent care.

I've seen this scene before. It's season 2, episode 11 of *Seinfeld*, which takes place entirely in the waiting area of "*The Chinese Restaurant*." After a long, tortuous wait — and accusing the host of seating other patrons who came in after them — Jerry, George and Elaine leave in frustration, only to have the host call their name seconds after walking out: "*Seinfeld? Four!*" It's a classic. We've all been there.



Now, at this point, I could get all serious on you and talk about whether the father and son should have gone to urgent care first and that's why ERs are clogged with non-emergent patients. Or how they and I violated patient privacy by eavesdropping on private conversations. Or whether ERs are understaffed.

But I won't.

I will share some other anecdotes to convince you that a lot of truly funny things happen in an ER that are more like Seinfeld than, I guess, ER.

CAN I HAVE A LORNA DOONE, TOO?

In another hospital ER, I noticed a lot of security guards, policemen and sheriff deputies walking by the door of our ER exam room. Being curious, I went into the hall to find out what was going on. There were about six male patients in various positions on gurneys. They had on bright yellow gowns. Not the usual subdued blue, green and gray colors. Maybe I was the only person who didn't know this, but the yellow gowns meant the patients were prisoners, were just arrested, were criminals, or were threats to staff and patients. Hence, all the cops. One of the patients moved his blanket to reveal that he was wearing a pair of handcuffs. Suspicion confirmed.

The person I was there with asked the ER nurse if she could bring them something to eat since we had been waiting for a long time, and the person I was with was getting hungry. The attractive young female nurse walked back into the exam room with a box of Lorna Doone cookies and gave my person a handful of the four-cookie packs. After about 30 minutes, I walked back into the hall to ask about our wait again. All the yellow-gowned patients were sitting on their gurneys, handcuffed, eating Lorna Doones. I don't know what happened during those 30 minutes, but I could only imagine.



IT'S BETTER WITH CHEESE

Now I'm back in the hospital ER with the unlucky father-and-son patients.

A woman, I'm guessing in her late 30s or early 40s, walked in briskly. No outward appearance of illness or injury. She's smiling. She walked up to registration and asked if her friend was there yet. An ambulance was bringing her friend to the ER.

Registration said yes, she was. The woman then pulled out a quart-size Ziplock bag with shredded cheddar cheese and said, "Great. She called. Please give this to her. It's for her chili." Then the woman briskly walked out again, having delivered what her friend wanted. Hope she had a spoon.



ESSENTIAL OILS GREASE PALMS

Back in the other ER again. One of the reasons I walked into the hall the second time — the first being when I saw the yellow-gowned patients — was to inquire about how long it would be before an inpatient bed opened up so the person I was with could be admitted. The woman at the nursing station said she had no idea, and no beds were open at the moment and wouldn't be for hours.

The person I was with is a big reader. So, I went to the gift shop to buy a book. Any fiction would do. Even nonfiction at this point. Unfortunately, all but one of the many books at the gift shop were related to the Roman Catholic Bible. Bible verses. Bible sayings. Biblical figures. What the Bible says. The Bible. This was Catholic hospital, after all. None of that secular crap about romance or crime.

The only non-Bible book was a little book called, "Everything you need to know about essential oils." Maybe it has something to do with anointing the dead or something. I don't know. I bought it anyway and brought it to my patient. My patient's eyes rolled as they gave it back to me. Zero interest if not insulting and a waste of money.

So, I brought it out of the exam room and gave it to the person who told me it would be a long wait for a hospital bed. The person looked at the little book and said, "Essential oils! I love essential oils." Then she showed it to another person at the nursing station who, apparently, also loves essential oils. And she said, "Essential oils! I love essential oils." Then they talked about who would get to read it first and whether or not they should leave it at the nursing station or take it home for safe keeping.

You know what happens next, right? This is Chicago after all.

Less than 30 minutes later, transport comes in and tells my patient that the bed is ready.

The Lord does work in mysterious ways.

What's the market lesson here? Not much.

Hospital ERs are stressful places treating the life-threatening illnesses and injuries of the people we love. I can't say enough about all the people who work in them. Shame on hospital administrators who don't work every day to make their lives easier.

But if you're ever in one and need a laugh, sit near the registration desk.

AUTHOR



David Burda began covering healthcare in 1983 and hasn't stopped since. Dave writes this monthly column "Burda on Healthcare," contributes weekly blog posts, manages our weekly newsletter 4sight Friday, and hosts our weekly Roundup podcast. Dave believes that healthcare is a business like any other business, and customers — patients — are king. If you do what's right for patients, good business results will follow.

Dave's personal experiences with the healthcare system both as a patient and family caregiver have shaped his point of view. It's also been shaped by covering the industry for 40 years as a reporter and editor. He worked at Modern Healthcare for 25 years, the last 11 as editor.

Prior to Modern Healthcare, he did stints at the American Medical Record Association (now AHIMA) and the American Hospital Association. After Modern Healthcare, he wrote a monthly column for Twin Cities Business explaining healthcare trends to a business audience, and he developed and executed content marketing plans for leading healthcare corporations as the editorial director for healthcare strategies at MSP Communications.

When he's not reading and writing about healthcare, Dave spends his time riding the trails of DuPage County, IL, on his bike, tending his vegetable garden and daydreaming about being a lobster fisherman in Maine. He lives in Wheaton, IL, with his lovely wife of 40 years and his three children, none of whom want to be journalists or lobster fishermen.

Visit 4sight.com/insights to read more from David Burda.