

e-Postcard from Ankara

e-Postcard from Ankara, Turkey

June 17, 2004

Hello to all,

The surgeon looked at me over the top of his glasses and said, "I am removing the foreign body from your wife." He wasn't looking for approval, but wanted to make sure I understood his halting English. I nodded briefly and he turned back down to his work.

We'd been referred to this Hospital by our hotel, the Sheraton. While the rest of the group we were riding with was staying in the old city in a converted old home, we'd ridden out ahead in an effort to get to a doctor as quickly as we could. We chose the Sheraton for three reasons, 1) any cab driver in this city of five million would know where it was (finding hotels in a foreign city is a simple matter if you hire a taxi and follow them, but first you have to be looking for a hotel they are aware of, not a sure thing unless it's a major hotel), 2) we were hopeful they could refer us to an English speaking doctor, and 3) we needed a known quantity, a reliable baseline, for some recuperation for Steph and recovery for me.

The Sheraton Ankara came through on all counts. Beautiful, modern, all amenities and a staff that would stop at nothing until all of our needs were met. We just had to get over the unease of every entering vehicle except our bike being inspected with a rolling mirror to ensure nothing was rigged underneath them and the metal detectors set up at the front door. We scarcely gave them any mind once we'd walked into our room and saw the holy of holies, the most desired objects of any American traveler long away from home: washcloths.

Once showered and changed into civilian clothes, we ventured forth to have Steph's hand looked at by a doctor and her stitches removed. She'd been fighting an infection in the wound for several days and had only agreed to start taking antibiotics after I painted dark word pictures of gangrene, sepsis and amputation. She'd drained it of disgusting fluid for several days in a row and in flushing the wound had used five bottles of Hydrogen Peroxide (available in any pharmacy under its Turkish name of Oksijenli Su, sold right next to the Prozac and Viagra, over the counter). But still the infection lingered, her wound looking better, but still sore and puffy on one end.

The hotel even had a nurse on staff. She came to our room along with a front desk worker who spoke English. The nurse's forceps were too big to allow her to grasp the tiny sutures, and she lacked a small enough cutting instrument to effectively remove the stitches. "You will need to visit a doctor," she concluded. We went downstairs and met with the hotel doctor, a sports medicine specialist who counts the Turkish Olympic team among his responsibilities. He too pleaded insufficient equipment not suited to the task at hand and referred us to a local hospital with an English speaking doctor he knew.

A short taxi ride took us to the Ankara Güven Hastanesi, where a front desk worker walked us down the endless corridors and multiple elevator rides typical of a large hospital complex to deliver us to the emergency room (ER) where our doctor worked. Unfortunately, the doctor we'd been referred to wasn't on duty, so the ER staff put out a call for English speakers. A female staffer soon appeared, and after offering translation services, quickly found a doctor walking by who also spoke English.

Thus we ended up in an ER suite with a Turkish surgeon, an ER nurse, and a full complement of shiny new ER medical equipment.

Steph winced as the surgeon reached in to pluck the foreign object from the wound with his forceps. Even after a horse sized injection of Novocain, the tears were flowing steadily and overwhelming the facial tissue I'd given her from my pocket stash I was using to fight my severe cold. Her usual monumental pain threshold had been breached, and I could tell she was in a lot of discomfort.

The surgeon let out a brief exclamation of triumph and held up the forceps, his prey held proudly under the bright examination light. It was a small chunk of gravel, about four times the size of the head of a straight pin. It was small, but big enough to cause the infection we'd been fighting for days.

He then proceeded to pull up the sutures one by one and slice them with a scalpel blade, deftly cutting and removing them with one smooth, quick motion. Each time he pulled up a stitch, Steph gasped, the Novocain insufficient to numb the infection inflamed nerve endings in her palm.

Soon it was over, the nurse and doctor scrubbing the wound with antiseptic and sealing it behind sterile gauze.

The surgeon asked us to come back in the morning so he could check the wound, accepted our thanks and then turned us over to the ER clerks.

"This will be interesting," I thought. "Half an hour of a surgeon's time, half an hour of an ER nurses time, half an hour in an ER suite, and all the consumables of the procedure," I quickly tabulated the probable bill of a comparable U.S. procedure in my head.

The clerks asked for Steph's name and birth date and after a few minutes swiveled the calculator around on their counter so I could see the total bill.

I was stunned. Even for Turkey, this was amazing. 34,000,000! Thirty four million! I couldn't believe it. I struggled for breath, gulped and stuck my hand in my pocket.

I looked up at the clerk, he replied with a sincere smile and pointed down again at the number.

34,000,000.

I fingered my international medical insurance and evacuation policy in my pocket and wondered if they could be of any help. "No," I figured, "I got myself into this, I might as well just do it on my own."

I accepted my fate and reached into my pocket. I tossed the two 20,000,000 lira notes onto the counter and sighed in resignation.

The clerk gave me the 6,000,000 in change from his own pocket and I turned back to Steph, white as a ghost in the ER receiving room chair.

"How much was it?" she asked.

"34 million," I replied. Her eyes grew wide. She couldn't believe it either.

"Half an hour of a surgeon's time, half an hour of an ER nurses time, half an hour in an ER suite, and all the rest, for 34 million?" she asked, incredulous.

"I know, it's amazing," I replied. "All that for about 23 U.S. dollars."

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She took my hand and we walked out to catch a cab, celebrating the fact that affordable health care is indeed possible in at least one place in the world.

Be well,
Doug