

SHELL SHOCKED

The Dreaded Dire Diagnosis Delirium

By Art Stevens

The family physician was testing my recall abilities. He said: I'm going to read you a number and I'd like you to memorize it and feed it back to me. Okay? Here it is: 298750395969793913968468347890871."

I let the number sink in and then said: "29." The doctor looked up and said "Let's try another test. I'm going to give you three words and then I'd like you to repeat them. Ready? Red, white, blue."

This was a no-brainer. I replied quickly, "red, white, blue." He nodded. He was satisfied. There was hope for me yet. "Excellent. Now I'm going to add one more word to what I just said and you will now need to repeat all four. Red, white, blue, egocentric."

Another no-brainer. "Red, white, blue, egomastic."

The doctor said: No, I said red, white, blue, egocentric."

"That's what I said – red, blue, green, centrometric."

He said, "Let's pause for a moment. I'm going to give you an eye test now. See the chart on the wall? Read the bottom line."

I squinted and squinted and said "dot, comma, semicolon, dot."

"Those are letters. Try reading the line above that."

I squinted again as hard as I could. "mm, looks like l, m, z, s, r, u."

He said "Sorry, none right. Let's go right to the top. There are two letters there. Can you make them out?"

I didn't need to squint. "F, L."

“Excellent,” said the good doctor. “Now let’s see how your hearing matches up. I have a machine here and I’m going to put ear phones in you. The machine will play the lowest volume first, frankly, a sound that only a dog can hear. But it progresses to louder and louder sound. Let me know when you’re able to pick up sound and what is being said.”

If there was such a thing as squinting your ears I was doing it. I didn’t hear anything at first but I was told to expect that. After all, I’m not a cocker spaniel. I was waiting for the beginning of sound but I heard nothing. The doctor began to look tense. Finally, he looked at me and said in a very loud voice “Have you had problems with hearing before?” I heard what he said quite clearly and was about to tell him that he didn’t have to shout.

“I didn’t hear a single sound on that machine,” I said. He looked puzzled. “Here, let me check. Uh,oh. My bad. I didn’t plug the machine in. We’ll get back to that later. Let me run some more tests by you. Let me see you bend down and touch your hands to your toes.”

I stood up, loosened up a bit and bent over. My hands got as far as my knees. I strained a bit but couldn’t get them any lower. “That’s as far as I can go, doc,” I said. “I should probably take up yoga.”

“Let me put these tubes down your nose and take a look at your sinuses and vocal cords.” Before I could protest, the doctor put some drops in my nose and lowered some thin tubes into my nostrils. “Let me hear you say something,” the doctor said.

“Arggh,” I said.

“Again.”

“Arggggh,” I repeated.

Out came the tubes and the doctor made some notes on my chart. “Not bad,” he said.”But don’t expect to pass the audition for the Metropolitan Opera.” Whereupon, he let out a hearty laugh and tears nearly came out of his eyes.

“Ha, ha,” I said.

The good doctor sensed that I didn't think he was hilariously funny and stiffened up again. He said, "Let me see you walk a straight line. I want to check your balance."

I got out of the chair and started walking across his office. I wasn't walking a straight line. In point of fact, I walked a lazy capital "S."

"Were you drinking before you got here?" the doctor asked. "You should walk straighter than that."

I decided to be honest with the doctor. "Yes, doc, I did drink before I got here. It calms me down. I'm always fearful that you're going to say something like 'I've got bad news for you. You've got terminal frizzies but we're going to try a hair transplant.' I'm a coward when it comes to listening to a diagnosis."

The doctor reviewed his notes and looked up. "Not to worry. No bad news whatsoever today. But you should really clip your nose hairs. They're weighing you down. I was going to give you a stress test today but we'll wait until you come back with a hairless nose."

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