

# The Heart of the Matter



Lawrence P. Nolan

**I**t was more than seven years ago. I remember it like it was yesterday.

I was on my way to Ann Arbor on a beautiful, sunny Tuesday afternoon on August 25, 2009, for a *de bene esse* video deposition of my client's treating physician, Dr. Brian Chodoroff. The trial was a few months away and I needed to take his testimony.

Upon arriving, I started to unload my Suburban and carry in the file, our skeleton, the anatomically accurate blowups, easel, and exhibits for setting up the deposition room. I noticed a distinct shortness of breath while going back and forth from the parking lot to the doctor's office. I hadn't ever had a feeling like that before.

The symptoms didn't include a distinct pattern of pain in my chest. I felt no pain shooting down my left arm. There were no classic telltale signs of heaviness in my chest or an indication of any symptom that I could label as angina. I didn't even think I had indigestion, so it couldn't have been anything that I ate for lunch.

I immediately did what every good trial attorney worth his or her salt would do: I self-diagnosed. Running through the proverbial mental medical checklist, I told myself

that I was a nonsmoker, I was not overweight, I didn't have high blood pressure, I exercised and played hockey in an adult hockey league at least three times a week. I wasn't a red wine drinker (or apparently not enough of a red wine drinker). I ate chicken without the skin. I ate fish, fruit, and vegetables. I was the picture of health, right?

The deposition had been set up for a month. My client's treating physician was ready to go. The court reporter, defense attorneys, and videographer were waiting. The trial was only weeks away. Surely, canceling the deposition to go to the hospital to get checked, only to be told that whatever I was experiencing was nothing to worry about, was not an option. After all, couldn't it have just been indigestion? What about acid reflux? Could I reschedule everything out of fear or on a whim?

Would I be able to get everybody to reschedule the deposition before the trial? Would the doctor be able to get me a new *de bene esse* deposition date before the trial? Would defense counsel be willing to accommodate any of my possible false positives? Would the judge be sympathetic, understanding, or accommodating? Could the trial even be adjourned to a later date? Would an adjournment screw up the jury pool? Would my client be upset?

There were endless possibilities. But what was the answer?

To me, the answer was simple and straightforward: push on. More than two hours later, I was wrapping up my re-direct examination. I concluded that, obviously, I had made the right decision.

Dispel your paranoia, I told myself. You have a client to think of and represent. How would he understand all that was happening if I didn't?

After the deposition, I stopped at the Common Grill in Chelsea for a nice fish dinner around 7 p.m. I almost forgot about the fleeting episode that had played tricks on my mind. After dinner, I drove to my office in Eaton Rapids and arrived around 9 p.m. I was certainly happy to have the trial deposition out of the way. The case was now ready for trial. Obviously, I had made the right decision (by ignoring my paranoia); I told myself I could now use all the time I had saved from not having to reschedule everything to better prepare for trial.

Back at the office that night, I started unloading the file, exhibits, props, and blowups. All of a sudden, I had to sit down. What was this? Two or three trips back and forth and I was out of breath. I needed to sit and rest. Would that help? Would that resolve the problem? Was I simply out of shape? Was I once again a victim of my own paranoia? This was beginning to scare me.

I went back to the checklist. I lacked the classic symptoms and red flags on the

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list of warning signs of a serious cardiac problem. It was time to revisit my medical self-diagnosis.

I decided to rest for a bit and then drive home rather than go to the local emergency room. In my second incorrect medical self-diagnosis of the day, I determined I was fine. Sure, I was fine. Sitting down and resting seemed to help a lot. What message was my body sending me? There was no reason that I shouldn't be able to make the 30-minute drive home and go to bed. After all, I had been burning the candle at both ends. I was sure that a good night's sleep would cure what ailed me.

Upon arriving home, I was pleasantly surprised to find my son, Patrick, home for the evening after finishing his first semester of medical school at Michigan State University. Having been empty nesters for at least five years after Patrick and my daughter, Bridget, left for college, my wife, Laurel, and I were always excited when the kids came home and thought of it as a special treat.

This, however, was Patrick's first visit home since taking his first-semester exams at medical school. I confessed to Laurel and Patrick the events of the day. I explained to them that I was planning to go to bed and get up early the next morning to swing by the hospital and get checked in, checked over, and checked out as quickly as possible so I could get back to the office and begin preparing for another trial.

Although Patrick, the future family doctor, advised me to go to the ER that night, I decided that father knows best; clearly, I had a better handle on my condition than he did. After all, he had completed only his first semester of medical school. I was certain that Lawrence P. Nolan, the lawyer, had a better grasp on the situation than Lawrence P. Nolan Jr., the future doctor. After all, Patrick hadn't even received his first set of grades yet. What could he possibly know?

I awoke around 5 a.m. the next morning. I seemed to have had a moderately good night's sleep. As I got dressed and was about ready to leave for the hospital, young doctor-to-be Nolan insisted on going with me. And so it was that we left for the hospital together.

Minutes after arriving at the Ingham Medical Center ER, it was confirmed: elevated levels of troponin in my blood verified

everything that I was denying and everything Patrick had warned me of.

I was, in fact, having a heart attack.

The red flags went up and the hospital was abuzz. Patrick and the medical professionals knew exactly what to do. The medical machine went into auto pilot.

Before being put under general anesthesia to undergo a cardiac catheterization, I was asked to consent to having a stent placed in my cardiovascular circulatory system if one was deemed to be necessary by my cardiologist while I was still under general anesthesia. I agreed without hesitation and signed my consent.

Coming out of general anesthesia, the first question I asked my cardiologist was, "Did you have to put in any stents?" The response was "No." I sighed in relief at this news. I was quickly informed that this was not good news—this was the bad news! Stents would do no good. I needed *quadruple bypass surgery* and I needed it immediately. There were no other options.

I had that surgery nearly seven years ago. It confirmed what I was not. That night, Lawrence P. Nolan the lawyer was educated on not only who I was but, more importantly, who I was not.

My simple message is that we are lawyers. We are not doctors. Appreciate what we are and respect what we are not.

When looking at your own health and wellness, leave it to the medical professionals. You serve no useful purpose to your family or clients if you die before a case gets to court. Take it from me—if you have a feeling in your body that you have never previously experienced, trust your body. You know your body better than anyone else. Listen to what it's telling you. Stop whatever you're doing and seek medical help immediately.

After my episode, I was told that one in three people who do what I did end up going off the road and never make it home. Another one in three make it home, go to bed, and never wake up.

When I inquired as to the remaining one-third, I was told that I was it. They make it home, go to bed, and then go to the hospital.

Don't leave your well-being up to your heritage being Irish and lucky. If your body is telling you something, listen and take action. It may just save your life. It did mine. ■

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