

The Rodent File

I offer for your consideration an historical manuscript rescued from my files. As an exercise in bureaucratic morality, I think it suitable for academic physicians to ponder. The name of the hospital and the names of all the participants, except that of the rodent, have been changed.

The following is an exchange of memoranda that occurred more than a quarter of a century ago among a researcher, an inpatient Unit Chief, a Clinical Director, a Director of Nursing and the Director of a famous hospital. It may illustrate the concern of one of our great institutions for animal welfare, or the lost freedom to waste time without punishment since the onset of the digital age.... or it may indicate something entirely different.

The first memo arrived at the desk of the Unit Chief, who had been appointed to her position a scant fourteen months earlier, and was still groping her way among the mysteries of the huge bureaucracy of which she had become a part....

Ann Appelbaum, MD

NEW AMITY HOSPITAL

DATE: November 13, 1981
TO: Dr. Ann Orchard
FROM: Animal Research Ethical Committee, Boundary Laboratory
RE: Guidelines for animal care

-
- (1) It has come to the attention of our committee that rodents are currently housed on your unit.
 - (2) Although it is not presently required that you divulge the goals of this activity (Departmental Regulation P-NAH-112), it is important that you familiarize yourself with current guidelines for the ethical care of animals (Regulation P-NAH-113).
 - (3) To this end, you will find enclosed copies of the appropriate forms.
 - (4) When you are satisfied that these guidelines are being adhered to on your Unit, and that the staff is thoroughly familiar with contents of the enclosed regulations, a site visit will be carried out, to occur no later than 1 December, 1981.
 - (5) Upon submission of written request (form NAH 40) to this committee, you will be informed of the members constituting the site visit team.

For the Committee,

J. Gotte, M.D.

Enclosures

cc: S. Farber, M.D.

Clinical Liaison Representative

Once having recovered from the initial wave of panic engendered by this very official looking rebuke, the Unit Chief realized that the memo from the Boundary Laboratory must be referring to the recent discovery and dispatch of a white rat that had been smuggled onto the ward two months previously by a very naughty 17 year old patient. The lad had cared for his pet in his dresser drawer, but forgot to close the drawer on the day of a community meeting, thus permitting the ill-fated creature to wander onto the ward. She sought the advice of Dr. Farber, the beloved Clinical Director, who suggested responding in line with hospital regulations. The Unit Chief sent the following response to Dr. Gotte:

NEW AMITY HOSPITAL

DATE: November 17, 1981
TO: Dr. J. Gotte, M.D.
FROM: Extended Treatment Division, Unit 7 S
RE: Your memo of November 13th.

- (1) At the regular meeting of the entire 7 South staff on November 16, 1981, I conveyed to my staff the guidelines for the ethical care of animals (Regulation P-NAH 113) that you sent to me. I am now satisfied that the staff is familiar with those guidelines.**
- (2) Unfortunately, the staff was not familiar with the Rodent at Issue (yclept Templeton) except for a fleeting acquaintanceship between Templeton and the Ward Manager on November 9th, 1981. This mutual familiarity was brought to an untimely conclusion when the Ward Manager summoned Plant Operations (P-NAH 1109) instead of the Boundary Laboratory (as required according to P-NAH-113) with the regrettable result that Templeton was sacrificed with a blow to the head with a shovel rather than by the humane means set forth in the guidelines. The Ward Manager has now been apprised of the appropriate steps to be taken when our rodents escape from their cages.**
- (3) My Unit is now ready for a site visit, which can be carried out at the convenience of your committee. The site at which Templeton was housed is the 2nd dresser drawer from the bottom, Room #4. Your committee may wish also to visit the site of Templeton's demise (men's bathroom short hall).**
- (4) Memorial services for Templeton were held November 10th, 1981. As this was a private ceremony, members of your committee were not invited, although I now realize you should at least have been notified of this event.**

Respectfully submitted,

Ann Orchard, M.D., Unit Chief

cc: S. Farber, M.D.
Clinical Liaison Representative

Two days later, the following dispatch arrived from the desk of Dr. Gotte:

NEW AMITY HOSPITAL

CONFIDENTIAL

DATE: November 19, 1981
TO: P. Kristal, M.D.
FROM: J. Gotte, M.D.
RE: Activities of Joint Ethics of Animal Research Committee (JEARC)

- (1) To keep you fully informed of current activities of JEARC, I enclose the most recent exchange of memoranda concerning the Rodent At Issue.
- (2) As you will recall, this episode mushroomed to alarming proportions following the discovery of the male albino Sprague Dawley rodent (*rattus rattus*), né Templeton) on Clinical Unit 7S.
- (3) Prompted by fast thinking on the part of our Clinical Liaison Representative (CLR), this committee fairly surged into action (see memo #1) and met with exemplary response on the part of A. Orchard, M.D., Unit Chief of said Unit (see memo #2).
- (4) On the basis of the above items (1 and 2), Members of JEARC unanimously recommend A. Orchard, M.D. and S. Farber, M.D. CLR, as joint recipients of this year's Golden Rodent Award. We modestly suggest their citations should recognize outstanding talents in building Meaningful Relationships between Basic and Clinical Science.

Respectfully awaiting your reply,

We remain,

JEARC

For the Committee

J. Gotte, M.D.

JG: nc

enclosures

cc: A. Orchard, M.D.
S. Farber, M.D., CLR

Our archives failed to yield up the reply of the Medical Director of the Hospital. In retrospect I suspect that there was no written reply, the Director having been an expert on organizational behavior. Very likely he knew the traditional principle of the Mafia that, in general, the less one communicates in writing the better it is for all concerned, particularly (as in this case) if the issue is murder. (The Unit Chief had evidently been concerned about this issue, as evidenced by her careful choice of the scientific word "sacrificed" for the more inflammatory but more accurately descriptive "killed" in referring to the termination of the Rodent At Issue).

Apparently Dr. Gotte waited patiently for some time for an answer from his Director, nor did Dr. Orchard respond to the exciting news of her suggested nomination for the Golden Rodent Award again until nearly a month had passed. She then sent the following memo:

NEW AMITY HOSPITAL

DATE: January 14, 1982
TO: Dr. James Gotte, M.D.
FROM: Dr. Ann Orchard, M.D.
RE: Your Memo to Dr. Kristal

I am indeed honored, not to mention touched, by our Unit having been suggested by you as a possible recipient of the Golden Rodent Award.

I would, however, like to draw your attention to the fact that, as potential recipients of the Award, we on 7 South are the repository of a certain body of expertise that we would like to have recognized as being available to New Amity Hospital at times of crisis.

For example, I recently learned of a fire at Boundary Laboratories, which resulted in the local Fire Department being summoned: but no one from 7 South was notified. Our rodent-harboring experience has led a number of us to become adept at Rodent Rescue (RCPR), including the technique of Mouse-to-Mouse resuscitation and other first aid procedures which we would be willing to put at your disposal in the (we hope unlikely) event of further disasters in your department.

We are currently engaged in perfecting our methods of Rodent Restraint and Seclusion, in the hope that our future harboring of rodents will remain undetected by hospital authorities. We will, of course, keep you apprised via periodic progress reports.

Respectfully,

Ann Orchard, M.D.

AO: jr
cc: M. Burley, Dir. Of Nursing
S. S. Farber, M.D.

NEW AMITY HOSPITAL

DATE: January 27, 1982
TO: Ann Orchard, M.D.
FROM: James Gotte, M.D.
RE: Ongoing Nonsense

Thank you for your most recent memo in re: our efforts to develop a meaningful liaison between basic science and clinical art.

We now have completed preparations for your generous offer to demonstrate MMR (Mouse-to-Mouse Resuscitation). All mice are in place, and are now awaiting notification from you of The Date.

I plan to send announcements to all full-time attending physicians and nursing staff, since professional personnel will need these special skills as rats spread from your unit throughout the hospital.

Please give me some lead time on your choice of dates, since Doctor S. Grinnen will want to arrange proper coverage for what promises to be a Media Event.

Keenly anticipating your early reply, I remain,

J. Gotte, M.D.

cc: M. Burley, Director of Nursing
S. L. Farber, M.D., Boundary Laboratory Clinical Liaison Representative
J. Szechuan, Ph.D., Chairman, Ethics for Animals Committee

Dr. Gotte's reply marked the end of the Rodent File, which remained for the ensuing quarter century among my papers, as if asking that something be done other than allowing the File to be shredded, upon my retirement, along with countless other documents valuable to me alone. Might it be turned into fiction? Might the imaginary clinician read, "notification from you of The Date" as an invitation, and the potential eroticism inherent in the idea of "MMR" as an allusion to what might transpire were she to respond accordingly? Or might she read "ongoing nonsense" as a signal that the game was becoming tedious? And the onslaught of "rats spreading throughout the hospital" as a metaphor for "enough, already!"?

Might the Rodent File have been instigated by the mysterious Dr. S. Farber? He might have been the behind-the-scenes initiator of the cascade of memos. After all, as the mentor of the new faculty at the hospital, it was up to him to teach them how to function in the complex world of a huge hospital. Could he have put Dr. Gotte up to creating the initial memo as a means of introducing a bureaucratic virgin into the torturous convolutions of a vast organization?

The File, unaltered by fiction or conjecture, can simply be offered as a fragment of the history of a time when innocent merriment was given more scope than is allowed in today's more intense, wired, daily struggle? Not that there's no joking in the e-mail culture of today, but it is all too easy to share a joke with "All" by a mere keystroke --only to realize ten minutes later that "All" may include the dean of the medical school, one's supervisor, a favorite donor well known for his lack of a sense of humor and his devotion to the rights of animals, and various other people who could either be harmed or armed by a silly document. Indeed, we are beginning to recognize that new technology promotes impulsivity, permitting us to ignore the consequences of our actions until it is too late to modify them. The childishness in all of us is no longer constrained by the limitations of technology as it was when we had time to linger over carefully constructed memos, conscientiously typed by one's secretary and allowed to be savored at leisure by the recipient forty years later.