

Monday Message, Monday, June 2, 2025

How do doctors make a diagnosis?

They put together the symptoms described by the patient, the signs they elicit during physical examination and the results of various tests. Like pieces of a puzzle, the doctor puts together all the bits of information and comes up with a picture– a diagnosis. Historically, all we had were the symptoms and signs– the history and physical. Now we have so much more: blood tests, molecular tests, diagnostic imaging, functional testing and more.

We put all the information into our brain and we come up with the answer.

But what if we don't remember that Lyme disease can cause joint pain, or we didn't ask about the bull's eye rash so we didn't order the blood test?

What if we didn't read the pivotal clinical trial that proved that carotid endarterectomy was better than aspirin?

With the explosion of knowledge in medicine how can we possibly keep up?

Data science.

We can feed all the symptoms and signs and test results into a computer and the computer will give us a diagnosis. But what if we don't have all the information? We only know the patients' vital signs and some bloodwork?

Predictive analytics can tell us that the patient likely has sepsis and we should start antibiotics without waiting for the blood cultures.

Artificial intelligence is largely a prediction tool developed using massive amounts of data. Remember your first statistics course? To be certain of the statistical significance of your experiment, you had to have a big enough sample size. Imagine millions of data points. The certainty of the answer increases with ever increasing number of data points.

Wednesday, June 4th Dr Amin Madani will give the Dr A. S. MacDonald lecture addressing Artificial Intelligence

Join me in the RBC Theatre at 0730 or online.

Don't forget the DOS Business meeting this afternoon at 5 PM

Have a great week

Gail

Monday Message, Monday, June 9, 2025

I attended the CZ Quality Summit last Thursday. Lots of great stuff happening in our zone. You may recall that Quality is a key pillar in our DOS strategic plan and I wanted the department to focus on quality this year. I am delighted to report that there are lots of initiatives in the Department including the use of Enhanced Recovery protocols, looking deeper into NSQIP data to determine the drivers of our outcomes as well as lots of initiatives that perhaps don't fit into the big buckets but make a difference to our patients everyday.

I want to give a big shout out to Dr Richard Hurley who is our CZ NSQIP champion for meeting with divisions to do a deeper dive on divisional data. Step one is to collect and share our outcomes- but step two is looking into the root causes of any negative outliers. Are those poor outcomes real? If yes, what are the drivers? It is only by looking deeper that we can improve.

You have heard me say this before: each surgeon, each division needs to know their own data. They need to identify quality metrics that are relevant to their specialty, measure them and report on them. Each surgeon needs to know their individual results. A surgeon whose outcomes are below average can hide within a division where others have good outcomes. Similarly, a super star surgeon can pull up the average of those around them. This is not about public reporting, this is about individual surgeons knowing their own results so that they can improve. Even if someone has excellent results, we should always be striving to do better, not to be complacent. Good enough has no place in surgery (I said that last week).

We will have two grand rounds focussed on quality in the upcoming year. I am looking forward to hearing about the successes in our department. It is important that we learn from each other.

Have a great week
Gail

Monday Message, Monday, June 16, 2025

Good morning!

We arrived in Toronto last evening. Good drive- good weather- usually we get a thunderstorm as we cross from Edmundston into Quebec. We missed the highway 30 bypass of Montreal - 😞. There was construction (of course- it is summertime) and the big sign I was looking for was gone!! But all good-only 45 min behind schedule!

This morning I am sitting in my overgrown garden with my cup of coffee and my dog Elaine. My red rose is blooming for the first time in years. I think this speaks to the power of benign neglect! My wisteria is blooming, the ivy has taken over and the pink rose looks sad. But I am looking forward to some gardening and getting dirt under my fingernails.

My daughter arrived last evening and is doing her laundry- like all university students!! We have a busy schedule the rest of the week visiting with all the kids and grand kids.

We have sunshine and blue sky today but the forecast is calling for rain over the next few days- so I won't be homesick for Halifax weather!!

Have a good week

Gail

Monday Message, Monday, June 23, 2025

Happy Monday from hot and humid Toronto!

Recently the Faculty of Medicine had a wellness retreat. Dr Lianne Johnson represented the Department of Surgery. It is recommended that we have a Wellness Committee. I am supportive of this. Anyone who is interested should send me an email and we can go from there.

I have to admit my bias on this - and I recently read a book by Amanda Litman on leadership which supports my view.

“You do not have the responsibility to make every day at work a trip to Disneyland” - “to fulfil every person’s full social, emotional and physical needs every ...day”

But as leader you do have the responsibility to create a psychologically safe work place, provide appropriate compensation and benefits and “ to set clear guardrails and boundaries so people can work to live, not live to work”.

It is about providing the environment where people can do their job, enjoy their work, look forward to coming to work and providing them with the time they need for personal time- whether that means going to a yoga class, going for a hair cut or just being able to disconnect after they leave work. It is not about providing the yoga class.

I have learned a lot since coming to Halifax.

I came from an environment where I was always connected, expected to respond to email 24/7, where I did all my research thinking and writing at night and on weekends. Of course every weekday was a clinical day starting at 7 am and ending at 7 pm. I was very productive. But did it have to be this way? At the time yes because the clinical work paid the bills and I had a big practice. You have the “luxury” of the AFP. You have stable income and if you need to take some time for yourself whether it is a research day or a mental health day- you can do so without penalty.

I have learned that it is ok to disconnect -and I shouldn’t expect response to my emails until the next work day- and you know what? That is just fine! So I am not starting a yoga class for the department of surgery but if you need to switch you call so that you can attend a yoga class that is just fine with me.

I don’t think it is the obligation of Dal or NSH or IWK to provide activities and I hate being told that we have to have a wellness committee but I believe it is the obligation of Dal, NSH and IWK to provide a work environment wherein as adults we can choose to take an hour out of our work day to do something for ourselves, to not be micromanaged, to be respected, and to choose to have wellness committee if we want one.

Have a great week
Gail

Monday Message, Wednesday, July 2, 2025

I hope everyone had a wonderful Canada Day weekend. The weather cooperated which is always nice.

We arrived back late yesterday afternoon after our visit with family in Toronto, hence a Wed message instead of a Monday message!

Although officially summer starts with the summer solstice, I always feel that summer doesn't really start until the kids are out of school and we celebrate Canada Day.

Canada Day is more important than ever. We have much to celebrate. We speak of Canadian values of tolerance, acceptance of diversity, fairness, politeness, our social safety net, decision making by consensus, democracy. Sure we aren't perfect but nothing is. Yet we still strive to look after one another. There is lots of work still to be done, we can always do more. I know that many folks will say this is a system problem, the government needs to fix it- what can I do as one individual?

Kindness and acceptance go a long way. And maybe you take some time to make a few phone calls on behalf of your homeless patient, or you donate to a food bank- it all counts.

A friend of mine said they are looking forward to a simple summer. What a great expression! A simple summer- to enjoy the warmer weather, go to the cottage or go camping, slow down a bit, relax, spend time with your friends and family and just enjoy being alive.

That's my plan! Hope it is yours too!

Gail