

Life's a gas, medically speaking

Written by Kristin Brinner

Thursday, 03 June 2010 13:35 - Last Updated Thursday, 03 June 2010 16:13

I'm laughing about it now, but it was pretty scary at the time.

My first and so far only Panamanian medical emergency began as an upset stomach. I took an antacid, and it got worse, spreading into a sharp band of pain that encircling my middle. I took a painkiller, but in minutes I was doubled over. It was then I decided it might be a good time to see a doctor.

I drove myself to the nearby clinic in the Panamanian interior. Suffering through the dozen speed bumps on the road, I arrived at the clinic, shaken and in need of immediate medical attention.

The clinic, it turned out, was perfectly equipped for predictable tourist disorders: hangovers, sunburns, upset stomach and diarrhea brought on by garden variety overindulgences due to overexposure to all-inclusive poolside cocktails and buffets ... and not much else.

Back in the car, I continued my torturous trek to a new clinic I'd heard about, 20 minutes away.

I was ushered into the emergency area, and tended to immediately. Impressed by the timely attention, I spent the entire afternoon hooked up to painkillers and saline.

A very attractive nurse appeared and took ultrasounds of my mid-section. She slides her wand along my greased-up distended girth and says, "I think it will be a girl." Professional, attractive and a sense of humor — I am impressed. I make a mental note to shed a few pounds.

Shortly thereafter, a doctor arrived and informed me that I have pancreatitis, and need to proceed immediately to a hospital immediately, and see a specialist. There is an ambulance already en route to take me there.

I asked, in part, to fill an awkward silence, how much that ambulance ride would set me back. His answer left me stunned: "Four hundred dollars."

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I opt out of the ambulance option, and arrange for my friend Juan to pick up my wife, who I left fretting at home, and take us to the hospital in Panama City, where a specialist is awaits me.

I arrive at the hospital in Panama City in good time. I sit as patiently as possible through a mind-numbing round of admitting paperwork.

Soon I am in triage, being informed by a GP that I will require gallstone surgery. "I thought I had pancreatitis"?

"No, it is definitely gallstones, I can see on your ultrasound, you have a blockage" the doctor replied. "You'll see when the specialist arrives." He did an about-face and disappeared down a corridor.

I sat for five long hours, waiting, without food, water or attention of any kind, before I lose my patience.

I pulled my I.V. needles from my arm and sign myself out, and order my protesting wife and friend into the car.

We head back to the clinic and request a referral to another hospital.

A new attending physician examines my ultrasound and tells me I have gas.

I spend the next four days in bed with my wife's chicken soup.

Today, I am fully recovered, thanks to the expert care of care of a specialist in internal medicine

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who is an advisor to the Minister of Health and writes the medical column for The Panama Star. He ordered a full set of blood tests and changed my medication, which indicated that a medication prescribed by my doctor in Canada was the true cause severe stomach pain.

The moral of my story ... get your ducks, and your doctors in a row. Line 'em lined up before you need 'em, or risk losing your imaginary gallstones, and cool, when you need it most.