

A Lottery Ticket

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OK, I admit it. I sometimes play the lottery. Just a dollar here and there; after a tank of gas. Why do I waste my time? I'm never going to win. Every bit of my luck was used up 69 years ago when I hit a jackpot that somehow managed to keep me alive.

My mother would sometimes talk about my first birthday, January 7th, 1953. She kept a picture of that day and stares at it from time to time. I still have it. There I am, standing beside a single-candled birthday cake, mouth wide open, looking straight at the camera in either fear or confusion. And I remember how my mother used to gaze at that picture with a faraway look in her eyes and say, "I knew there was something about you that just didn't seem right."

The ensuing spring brought a flurry of respiratory infections I could never quite shake. Finally, in mid-summer, my temperature shot up. In medical lingo I would one day learn, I 'spiked a fever.'

Dr. Lewis Calvert was an institution around Weston. A local farm boy, he received his medical degree from Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia then left to become a field surgeon in World War I. Upon returning, he established a practice on Main Street that lasted over 4 decades. He delivered babies until 1952, when the last child he brought into the world was at Cushing Memorial Hospital in Leavenworth—a 7-pound 7-ounce boy named Donald Frey.

He was there for everyone, it seemed, even visiting my grandfather on his death bed at the family farm north of town.

But Dr. Calvert always seemed to have a special fondness for me, and I can't help but wonder if it was because of what happened that summer of 1953. Three years later, I would be one of the first children in Weston to whom he gave the polio vaccine. Maybe he, too, understood that my luck had already run out, and that I needed all the help I could get.

At his office that summer morning, Dr. Calvert examined me and determined that I needed antibiotics. At that time, a physician could count all the different antibiotics in the world on one hand. And of them all, penicillin was the mainstay. He gave me a penicillin injection, the strongest dose he felt he could safely use. Reassured, my mother took me home. I, of course, can remember none of this. Perhaps it's for the best.

Soon, my temperature was spiking again, even more rapidly. My mother called and described my condition. Dr.

Calvert explained that he'd given the maximum dosage of penicillin and could do nothing else. My mother sat up with me that night. Later, she would recall the exact chair she sat in, as well as the book she read to keep her mind occupied. But every hour she'd take my temperature. It just kept climbing.

My mother's upbringing was marked by the hard work, resilience, and stoicism that were the hallmarks of early twentieth century Weston. She had ridden a horse 5 miles into town to go to High School, trotting down a dirt road with her neighbor Mary Ruth Richardson Bradley, both dressed in overhauls, their obligatory school dresses stuffed in their saddlebags to be donned when they arrived for class. She had survived the Dust Bowl, when a black sky meant dirt was coming down from the Dakotas, and a red sky meant dust from Oklahoma. She had seen farm foreclosures, savings wiped out, hunger that no one today can even imagine, and neighbors on the brink of collapse. So when my temperature continued to rise, and knowing that no other medical options were available, she responded the only way she knew. When the fever hit 105, she simply stopped taking it.

A short time later, my father came home from the night shift as the agent at the Burlington Depot at the foot of Main Street. Dr. Calvert's office would be opening soon, and it was agreed my father would take me.

Dr. Calvert's office was on the east side of downtown, halfway between City Hall and the Post Office. Such references are meaningless now. Both moved long ago. But I can still remember his office from visits I later made in grade school. It had a simple waiting room and one exam room. His sole staff member was his receptionist, Miss Marie Ohlhausen. She would later become the local librarian, and distribute thousands of books to kids like me.

I've sometimes wondered what I must have looked like, a one-and-a-half-year-old, listless and moaning from fever, lying on my back on Dr. Calvert's only exam table. My mother, always the master of understatement, would recall "you sure didn't look very good." My father was blunter: "You looked like hell."

My Father remembered Dr. Calvert examining me, listening to my heart, my chest, looking in my throat—all the standard elements of a medical exam. Then he paused as if deep in thought, trying to put it all together. At that moment, according to my father, I reached back with my hand, and started rubbing my neck. Dr. Calvert gasped and looked thunderstruck. He placed his hand under the back of my head, and raised my back up off the table. My neck didn't bend. It was stiff as a board. Whatever Dr. Calvert said next, my father remembered only one thing. "We've got to get this boy down to KU right away."

Of course, no ambulances were available at that time, and even if they had been, Dr. Calvert was in no mood to wait. Instead, he and my father, carrying me in his arms, piled into Dr. Calvert's car for a mad dash to the Kansas

University Medical Center. Interstate 29 was still years away. Instead, the route must have been down highway 45, past Beverly and Farley, slipping through Parkville, across the Fairfax Bridge, onto Rainbow Boulevard and KU. Later that day, my mother arrived.

25 years later, as a medical student, I would study the nuances of a disease called cerebrospinal meningitis. Bacteria from a source elsewhere in the body, such as the respiratory infection I was almost certainly carrying, enter the lining of the brain and spinal cord. There, cut off from much of the rest of the circulation, they begin to multiply rapidly. Without immediate treatment, the outcome is disastrous. As we drove toward Kansas City, the growing infection was beginning to gobble up every molecule of oxygen and glucose it could find, each passing moment increasing the risk of a convulsion.

The team at KU followed standard procedure. A spinal tap was performed, and the fluid analyzed. Today, intravenous antibiotics would be started. But this was 1953, and intravenous lines in children were poorly developed. Instead, the Doctors gave the antibiotics through the same needle that was used for the spinal tap, injecting the medication directly into the fluid surrounding my spine and brain. They would continue to do this every six hours for the next ten days.

Every six hours. Ten days. Forty spinal taps. “Your back looked like a little pincushion,” my mother would recall.

The specific bacterium found in my spinal fluid was called *streptococcus pneumoniae*, a highly inflammatory organism infamous for producing pus and swelling around the brain. By the time I got to KU, the pressure inside my skull must have been increasing rapidly.

The textbooks that I would later study were clear in their sober assessment of the disease. Even with the antibiotics of today, the mortality rate for pneumococcal meningitis can be 30%. The complication rate due to scarring of the brain tissue—blindness, deafness, difficulty walking, seizures, and especially brain damage—exceeds 90%. Even with treatment.

Yet somehow, I won the lottery. The child in the crib next to mine received the same treatment prescribed to me. He also survived, but became totally deaf. Not once did anyone observe me having a seizure. When I was brought back to KU for a check-up a month after dismissal, the doctor picked me up off the exam table and stood me on the floor to see if I could walk. Instead, I started to run. I was nearly out of the building before they caught me.

As years passed, I had what most would consider a normal Weston childhood. I could cut a thousand sticks of tobacco in a day, or haul a thousand bales of hay. At one time or another, I probably mowed half the lawns in town. I played football (not particularly well) and was conference champion in the 100-yard dash.

The experience at KU left its mark on my parents, too, and explained some of their odd “rules” that made no sense to me. As a kid, I was never allowed to ride in the back of a pick-up truck like my friends, laughing and bouncing along in the summer breeze. Instead, my father would nearly fly into a rage whenever I’d bring it up.

It wasn’t until years later that I learned that one of the other patients on the same ward at KU was a boy who’d been riding in the back of a pick-up driven by his father. They’d hit a bump, and the child was thrown out. He’d landed on his head on the concrete. There was nothing the family could do but wait for hours at the bedside while he died. My father, of course, had watched in silence as it all unfolded.

Physically, I had turned out fine. But as I pondered my medical textbooks, perhaps the most chilling fact I encountered was the near certainty of brain damage in survivors of pneumococcal meningitis. How had I dodged the bullet? It wasn’t because of anything I did. It’s all lost in that vacuum of events that occur before we’re old enough to form memories.

Later, I graduated from medical school, and eventually became responsible for the education of hundreds of students in nursing, pharmacy, medicine, dentistry, and physical and occupational therapy. I published articles, gave lectures around the world, and treated thousands of patients. Some of them were also children with meningitis.

I sometimes talk with medical students about my own history of meningitis. How I survived in an era of minimal treatment. Occasionally, a student will ask if I wound up with any brain damage. I usually shrug, chuckle, and say: “Who knows? Maybe I would have won a Nobel Prize by now if it hadn’t been for that damned meningitis.” This usually brings about nervous laughter, and the subject quickly changes.

No, the fact is, I had no brain damage. I had no physical problems, either, from the infection, swelling, and inflammation that pummeled my brain and nervous system 69 years ago. In 1953, I somehow squeezed a lifetime of good fortune out of a single event. I’ve exhausted my luck forever.

I have no idea how much longer I can keep this up. They’re all out there. Cancer, heart attacks, strokes, viral pandemics, plane crashes, terrorist attacks. When it happens to me, it happens, I guess. Every one of the past 69 years has just been icing on the cake.

So yes, I sometimes play the lottery. And each time I do, the lady behind the counter hands me the ticket and wishes me luck.

I just smile back at her and say thank you.