

## REFLECTIONS FROM THE FIELD

**Keep Us Safe**

Daniel G Tobin, MD

*Dr. Tobin is assistant professor of medicine at Yale University and chair-elect of the SGIM Board of Regional Leaders.*

**M**y first patient greets me with her rheumy gaze, limping into my office on crippled legs that have forgotten how to bend. My doctor's eyes see a woman in pain, and although I cannot cure, I can comfort—always. I write for a med that cannot be legally faxed, and the script begins its journey through pharmacy review, tracked and monitored by the State along the way. A controlled substance agreement, urine toxicology studies, and periodic pill counts journey with us as well—all to keep us safe.

My next patient has diabetic eyes, free from retinopathy but troubled all the same. Insulin is working well—neuropathy, gastropathy, and nephropathy all kept at bay. Neither too high nor too low, finger sticks and A1Cs testify to our great success. Yet the joy I expect from a job well done has no place in the dis-

tressed countenance I see. His success is his failure as well; insulin prevents him from driving the children he loves on the school bus, according to the DMV. I may have cured, but there is no comfort here—all to keep us safe.

A cough greets me next, tears streaming unbidden from eyes that slowly fade behind the haze of cancer that has won another war. Family and friends are long gone; she swims in oceans of pain propelled only by the scant breezes of precious air that can no longer fill her lungs. She has surrendered and accepted her fate and is now ready to begin her journey toward the light. There is no cure and little comfort for her; she must make this final journey on her own. She asks me to shepherd her forward toward death, her departure a little early and with

far less pain, but I cannot assist—all to keep us safe.

My last patient is an angry man; he does not greet me at all. He is depressed, but not too much, and complains loudly about the wait. Disheveled, distracted, and distressed, he defies Axis II, but I know that something is there. People make him uncomfortable, and he struggles to keep his pervasive anger at bay. Hand washing does not protect me from his contagious affliction, and those who meet him become angry, too. Our time is short, and I intend to discuss the alcohol I smell on his breath and the tobacco I smell on his clothes. But he cannot stay. The gun show is in town, and he has a purchase to make. He wants no comfort, and he wants no cure, but I do as I watch him walk away. There is nothing I can do—I cannot keep us safe.

SGIM