

I've been thinking...



Clock Watching
October 2008

I've been thinking about Europeans, Gandhi, Warhol, and me.

Last week I had the pleasure of delivering the keynote address at GS1's Bedside Scanning Conference in Bern, Switzerland. I can't report much from the meeting as the other lectures were delivered in French or German. However, I'm pleased to report that Swiss healthcare leaders are catching the fever.

In case you think we have bar-code point-of-care (BPOC) challenges in America, the Swiss have yet to convince drug manufacturers to apply bar codes to immediate containers, and their hospitals must still implement computerized medication-order entry before they can utilize BPOC. We have the luxury of well-established pharmacy information systems and the FDA bar-code rule behind us. Nevertheless, watch the Swiss. They *will* get it done, and they will do it right!

Speaking of *Swiss* and *watch*, it's no joke about these people being precise when it comes to time. My grandfather insisted he could set his watch by the trains in this land of his forefathers. Bern residents have been clock-watching since medieval times. From a stone tower in the heart of downtown, a glockenspiel has announced time since 1530. The inventor wanted to create "a clock that would always work." It still does. Every hour, on the hour, bells toll while seven carved bears (berns) whimsically rotate beneath the hands of the clock. The cobbled street below is lined with Europe's longest covered mall where I could have bought a Rolex, Swatch, or Swiss Army watch.

When my son and I arrived, we rented a Smart Car. Recently introduced to the US, these matchboxes on wheels are made by Mercedes in partnership with Swatch. It didn't seem so smart to me when the dashboard lacked a clock. Did they expect us to purchase Swatches, or are they simply deferring to a generation whose wristwatches have been replaced by mobile phones?

After my lecture, Jeff and I flew north and across the channel to triangulate between Oxford, Cambridge, and London. Ubiquitous bells pealed from church towers every hour *near* the hour. Seems the British are willing to fudge a minute or two. For the record, Big Ben appeared to toll spot-on.

In Cambridge we had the good fortune of joining a few hundred others at Corpus Christi College for the 14-minutes 55-seconds-late unveiling of the world's newest and most unusual clock.

Physicist Stephen Hawking (*A Brief History of Time*) was on hand with timely

remarks. He predicted the Corpus Clock would become "a much-loved, and possibly feared, addition to Cambridge's cityscape." We understood when the veil fell. Behind Hawking, a grotesque grasshopper appeared marching atop a gorgeous timepiece—devouring precious seconds. Inventor John Taylor calls the locust hovering over his £1 million contraption the [Chronophage](#) (time eater).



The Corpus Clock achieved the inventors desired effect, troubling me enough to ponder how I want to invest the few and fleeting days in front of me.

In the 1950's one of my favorite television shows was CBS's Beat the Clock. Contestants were allotted 60 seconds to complete stunts. While a time limit has not been set for implementing BPOC,

I thought about how every hour and 15 minutes a life is lost to a medication error. I also thought about how many of these are intercepted when bar-code-assisted technologies are implemented for matching patients medications and procedures.

The longer we drag our feet, the more lives are unnecessarily cut short, and the more grief must be endured by harmed patients and grieving loved ones. The clock is ticking for some.

Since he heads for India in November, my son was reading *Freedom at Night*—the historical account of Gandhi's role in seizing his nation's independence from Britain. On the flight home he had me read a few paragraphs highlighting the Mahatma's obsession with time. Among the humble leader's handful of possessions was an Ingersoll watch, which he frequently referenced in the interest of "devoting every minute to doing God's work during his days on earth."

Knowing my passion for full BPOC adoption in America's hospitals, Jeff suggested I adopt Gandhi's approach. "Dad, you need to fast until every hospital is bar coding." I told him not to hold his breath. Nevertheless, I don't want to waste precious time that might delay progress.

Unlike Gandhi, Andy Warhol ("15-minutes of fame") apparently didn't wear a wristwatch. Nevertheless he left us with this sage advice: "*They say that time changes things, but you actually have to change them yourself.*"

What do you think?

Mark Neuenschwander
mark@hospitalrx.com

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