

I've been thinking...



Upon the Retirement of Kenneth N. Barker
September 2009

I've been thinking about my first pharmacy-automation lecture, the life work of Dr. Kenneth N. Barker, and an autographed baseball I have on my desk.

I delivered my inaugural presentation on pharmacy automation fifteen years ago at an ASHP¹ meeting in the City of Brotherly Love. The room was packed. OK, it was a small room. But, hey, sometimes *who's* there matters more than *how many*.

At the time, PowerPoint didn't pack enough power to support the number of images I felt compelled to show. So, I came armed with two carousels of slides to discuss the plethora of automated-dispensing cabinets and robotic systems available to hospitals. Of course, I also got all Dick Tracey in my attempt to visualize the future for bar coding at the point of care. Anyway, if a picture's worth a thousand words, my word count approached national debt figures.

Halfway through the presentation, I mentioned that we needed to pause so I could change carousels. Sitting in the back row near the projector, a man stood and said, "I know how to do that." Though we had never met, I recognized the esteemed Auburn pharmacy professor from pictures. I had heard about his landmark research and unrelenting passion to reduce medication errors. [Dr. Kenneth N. Barker](#) swapped my trays without dropping any slides or jamming the machine.

Is it trite to say that I was honored? He should have been giving the lecture. I was struck that a sage was willing to learn whatever he could from a newbie. At the end of the lecture, while others were politely applauding, the gentleman who changed my slides smiled and gave me a big "thumbs up." Many similar gestures by Dr. Barker over the years provided wind my sails required for navigating to where I am today. On occasion, he's read and even taken the time to comment on my musings.

It was my privilege to interview the good doctor at the first unSUMMIT for Bedside Barcoding. We didn't talk much about best practice models or his latest research. He humored me as we dipped into his childhood, discussed his journey, and chatted about his family, interests, and passions. I learned, for example, that he owns an Elvis suit.

¹ [American Society of HealthSystem Pharmacists](#)

While I'm no James Lipton, I did steal the ten questions with which the host of Inside the Actors' Studio concludes each interview. When I got to, "What is your favorite swear word?" Dr. Barker paused and said, "When I get mad, I whistle."

Ken's career reminds me of a line from the Bible: "You do well to be angry—but don't use your anger as fuel for revenge."² His meticulous research that uncovered unanticipated high rates of medication errors in our hospitals understandably provoked his wrath. But, still more, it stirred up brotherly love (his eyes welled up in tears as he talked about it) and fueled a lifelong commitment to reform pharmacy practice by identifying causes of errors, designing safer systems, and promoting best practices. Millions of people across our country and around the world have benefited by anger channeled for good.

I did a bit of my own error research this week. I learned that the 1883 Philadelphia Phillies hold Major League Baseball's record for errors committed by a team in a single season—639 to be exact. They also own the post-World War II record with 234 errors committed during the 1945 season. As for most individual errors in a single season, that record is held by Billy Shindle—you guessed it—a Phillie. His 119 bumbles in 1890 won't get him a bronze statue next to Rocky Balboa's in front of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. No city has that much brotherly love. Don't even think about a plaque in Cooperstown.

As for Dr Barker, heaven alone knows how many errors have been avoided because of his unflagging efforts or how many lives and careers have been spared. At the end of my interview, I made an unusual request. I asked Dr Barker if he would sign a baseball for me. Now, no disrespect intended, but a lot of people own Elvis suits. I boast the distinction of being the only person in the world who has an official Major League baseball autographed by Kenneth N. Barker. As our brother retires from a hall-of-fame career, I'm standing in the back of the room with two thumbs up.



Mark Neuenschwander

mark@hospitalrx.com
<http://twitter.com/hospitalrx>

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² Ephesians 4:26