

MY APPRECIATION, BUT NO MORE LIVER, PLEASE

KALUNDA HOSPITAL, TABORA, TANZANIA

I vaguely remember being dropped off like a sack of potatoes from the Land Rover some June evening. The kind staff put me in a large VIP room at Kalunda Hospital. The hospital was built during the German Colonial Period in Tanganyika with one-meter walls, assuring natural air conditioning in the 1000 meter high Tropics. No surprise on the diagnosis: Hepatitis. Decades later when vaccinated for Hepatitis C, the earlier illness was indeed confirmed as Hepatitis A.

It is difficult to determine how I contracted the hepatitis. Most probably it was the meat I bought at the local market that became 'unclean' at the Blue Boar, our local hostelry in Igunga, Nzega District. After bathing daily in water with schistosomiasis and a nasty case of malaria - the hepatitis appeared the next month. Clearly, the North America body did not appear ready for the Tropics.

Some meters from Kalunda Hospital was the laboratory of David Livingston, the famous British explorer of the White Nile. All history buffs will recall the devastation of Tropical diseases to the generations of 'European' explorers.

During my month's stay in Kalunda Hospital the staff, services and restful facilities were absolutely first class. The Swedish doctor after getting the results of my Billirubin test from Dar es Salaam could not vouch for the accuracy but at a level of 10, she confirmed the diagnosis. Two weeks after my arrival I learned she too contracted hepatitis.

The nurses and other doctors were always attentive and I still smile at having been woken to take a sleeping pill, with the nightly regime. Yet in the initial hepatitis stages sleeping 15 hours daily is the routine. After taking the daily bath in immaculate facilities and walking back to Room 3, I fell in bed and frequently slept for another 5 hours until dinner.

THE CUISINE

The only 'fly in the ointment', as it were, was the main element of each meal, LIVER. It seems as if the very capable and thoughtful head chef learned I had hepatitis. I learned the disease degrades the liver and its essential functions for the body. I am unsure whether the chef had medical orders in the preparation of my meals.

No doubt he learned I had hepatitis and perhaps he experience treating others with the disease through feeding these patients liver. So liver was duly carried to me on a tray three times daily every day I was a guest in Kalunda Hospital.

While I remember mother's cooking tender calves' liver in butter the Tanzanian chef did not have that recipe or the young tender liver. In a word each piece of liver served was virtually identical: about 6 by 3 inches, 1/2 inch thick and looks similar to the sole of your well worn shoe.

MY BICYCLE 'SAFARI'

About two weeks into the liver diet I paid one of the night watchman to borrow his bicycle after lunch. My plan was to cycle to a meat market in Tabora and buy some steak, and politely ask the chef to change my menu.

I clearly remember cycling on the sandy road to the city and walking into the butcher shop to order the steak. As in most small Tropical towns, do not expect to see refrigeration. Nonetheless, with freshly supplied meat in a shop with rapid turnover you can be pretty well assured that, with thorough cooking, you will not suffer major adverse effects. I rationalized fresh steaks would improve my condition and probably could not worsen my health status.

Perhaps I bought 5 kilos of his best steaks. The congenial butcher informed me of the prime beef quality in Tabora Region. It certainly whets my appetite. The butcher was non-pulsed by my request and we had a couple jokes, as he was cutting and packing the meat.

As I began to ride back I distinctly remember slowing down on the sandy road, juggling the package I got off the bike and began pushing it back to the hospital. I have no idea what then happened. I must have collapsed!

Surely I knew nothing more for a day or so and woke up under the mosquito net in 'my' bed. Some kind soul must have picked me up and returned me to Room 3 and the bicycle to the watchman. The person who returned the bike probably got the steak. A fair exchange.

Needless to say I never enjoyed a whiff of the famed Tabora steak. It was back to LIVER for me for the three daily meals the remainder of my stay at friendly Kalunda Hospital.

FULL RECOVERY & POSTSCRIPT

It took several months including a return to the USA for further recovery. Naturally, I returned to Tanzania to complete my assignment. Most fortunately the liver is the only organ that regenerates itself. Most fortunately all of my subsequent liver function tests were favorable signifying a full recovery.

Clearly, I frequently have a gratified thought for the head chef at Kalunde Hospital and wonder how he had faired over these years. I do think of retracing my steps of those happy years in Tanzania. It should not come as a surprise that I always politely turn down liver when offered, but I do tell this story, which every one enjoys. They understand.

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