

The Face of the Healer

By Clyde W. Jones, M.D., FACA

Not long ago I had occasion to attend a retirement party and sat with the wife of one of my colleagues, to whom I administered an anesthetic for labor and subsequent Cesarean section some 18 years ago. I remember the occasion vividly but had no idea about the impact of the encounter with this lovely lady. She said to me, "I was so scared that night and when you walked over to me, before you said a word, I looked at your eyes over your mask, and immediately I relaxed and became comfortable." Then she added, "I will never forget you as long as I live." How flattering and yet humbling! This is all the more amazing since at the time I was stressed by a recent labor dispute and strike in my department. Evidently the importance of my calling transcended this handful of difficulties and sent an unmistakable message of concern and mission to this terrified patient. This should be the goal of every healer. This is especially true of anesthesiologists because we are most likely to encounter patients in various degrees of nervousness. To have this event so poignantly reiterated to me made an impression of lasting quality.

As a hypnotist, I am aware of the reliability and potency of nonverbal communication, which often belies the contemporaneous verbal communication, which is prone to management, prevarication and deceptive coloring. The eyes, of all the nonverbal parameters, are of inestimable potency. I hope there are many patients who have not had the opportunity to tell me of similar experiences.

In this day of technological emphasis in medicine, augmented by the legal climate in which we practice, interludes that dramatize the art and humanity of our calling are always refreshing and remind us of the history of the medical profession and its strong foundation in humanitarian principles. I hope that this crucial concept will never be forgotten by subsequent physicians despite the ever-increasing array of detracting influences that plague our practices each day.

We, who deal with pediatric patients, know that synchronization between the verbal and nonverbal moieties of our conversation is crucial, for children are experts at interpreting nonverbal communication. Mean what you say when you are dealing with a kid or you will be discovered! In the past 28 years, with the plastic surgery field program, I have anesthetized children of all ages from countries where I do not speak the language. In dealing with them, notwithstanding interpreters, I have always tried to convey to them and their loved ones, by nonverbal initiatives, what my laboring patients saw and so incisively expressed that evening.