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My Turn

When local 'heroes' protect lives at risk to themselves

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On Aug. 21, three Americans and two European men courageously subdued a heavily armed man on a French train preventing considerable carnage. They were quick and decisive and protected lives. I suspect their own well-being flashed across their minds, but so briefly or subconsciously that they showed no hesitation. Yes, they had special training and experience, but this does not deter me from recognizing their bravery and dignity. I join with all who praise them.

On Aug. 22, a distraught Taos man was brought to the Holy Cross Hospital Emergency Room by an anxious family. He was severely ill and the circumstances unclear. It was not known what he had ingested nor that he was becoming a toxic threat to everyone within 150 feet. Emergency Room physicians, nurses and other staff came immediately to his aid. Not only were all measures taken to preserve his life but simultaneously, to identify the risks to others in the Emergency Room and the entire hospital. Eventually they became aware of the dangerous potential of the poison, isolated the poor man to safeguard others, but they did not back away. I suspect their own well-being flashed across their minds, especially when some began to develop symptoms themselves, but so briefly or subconsciously that they showed no hesitation. The appearance of a man with an attack rifle is an obvious immediate threat. The sudden appearance of a semi-conscious critically ill man with a confused family is a more mysterious one.

This troubled man had taken extraordinary measures to guarantee that he would not survive but everyone else did. The patients in the Emergency Room were moved and new patients diverted away from danger. I extend my sincerest condolences to this man's family and my apology to all patients, and their families, whose care and attention were briefly interrupted by these very unusual circumstances.

I honor my colleagues who demonstrated their courage by remaining devoted to safeguard and preserve the lives of so many at grave risk to themselves. I am most relieved that no others were harmed. I know these people; they do the same everyday, protecting the lives of their fellow citizens and the tourist guests to our community. I also know we all get paid to do this job. We have accepted this role. However, in the Hippocratic promise that first we do no harm, there is no inclusion that we ourselves may be placed in its way.

I acknowledge not every step went smoothly and there were moments of confusion. This is inherent to the nature of such a bewildering event. Even Poison Control centers, with less than five other such cases, may have been slow, but inaccurate information is more hazardous than delayed but factual advice.

I am mindful that the Emergency Room is a challenging place. The waits in the ER are often long and the cordial rapport not always at its best. Please accept my apology and realize that we work on improving every day. Each year over 16,000 individuals seek care with additional thousands of worried friends and families at their side. We are a small rural hospital. We cannot afford to have a 10-bed Intensive Care Unit or a myriad of medical teams that are a part of those big facilities down the road with their hundreds of beds. We are committed to protect every patient's ultimate safety and right to have access to everything modern medicine can offer. This is why we have a helicopter pad and transfers. Fortunately, we have a talented healthcare staff that can recognize what we do well and when we have the knowledge but not the facility or extended specialization that may be needed.

But, in that moment, when a severe threat enters those doors, remember this instance when a group of dedicated and valiant local "heroes" protected the lives of others at risk to themselves. They too deserve our praise, not second guessing or accusatory tones from media at a safe distance. This little, rural community hospital that has been under scrutiny for past management controversies, that struggles daily with the financial pains of a chaotic cumbersome health care system, still has remarkable individuals that provide this lovely community with passionate care any time of day or night. I am extremely proud of all the people involved and the fact that I know they will be there when I or my family needs them. What would we all do if they were not here? What would have happened to all those innocent train passengers if those men had not been there?

Dr. Tim J. Moore is the Chief of the Medical Staff at Holy Cross Hospital.