

# Kidney Stones and Lithotripsy (My story)

All you mothers out there don't know what pain is..

until you've had a kidney stone. Ask any who's had one if they prefer it to childbirth. Pain is a powerful Pavlovian teacher. You learn to fear it. A kidney stone patient will sign anything you put in front of them promising relief.

I'll never forget that night around 1979, all alone in my apartment in Queens, NY quite poor and with no health insurance. A night of total unrelenting pain. A few days later this 'clinker' pops out (I'll spare the reader the details) and didn't know that instead of trying to flush the whole unnerving thing from my mind that I should have saved it. At least for posterity as the evidence of what I had had to endure a few days earlier. Easily 10mm.

A couple of years later, now *with* health insurance, I found myself at Los Gatos Community Hospital (LGCH). After they did the dye imaging, I was immediately given pain relief and learned it was a kidney stone and passed it that night. And told I needed to catch it this time which I did: a 10mm one, as I recall, Calcium Oxalate. My internist wanted me to see a urologist to discover how to prevent them. I called the referral phone number he gave me only to discover the urologist had no interest whatever in seeing me after learning I had already passed it. Preventing them doesn't seem to be in their field of vision (nor that of El Camino Hospital either I've learned). Anyway, when the next stone happened, I again returned to LGCH and discovered lithotripsy for the first time. And have had many of them there. In fact, on *all* of my subsequent stones.

In the summer of 2009, when the familiar acute kidney stone pain returned, I made the unknowing mistake of returning to Los Gatos Community Hospital. And this time *without* insurance (I couldn't afford it). And didn't know I should have shown up at Valley Med instead. Or that LGCH had just been acquired by El Camino Hospital and all that that entailed.

And at a loss to try to understand a whole different attitude than what I had come to expect from my previous visits. The emergency room doctor was noticeably irritated and displeased with my presence there. I tried to explain I was expecting a kidney stone. After the pain was treated, I was put in a wheelchair and transported to the exit. There had always been a CAT scan in my previous visits. My urologist wanted to see them when I followed up with him. "No!"-- he couldn't believe it. Actually the physician did me a favor so my urologist could help me find a low cost CAT scan (which turned up a 5mm stone -- that Valley Med taught me the following year how to pass on my own without lithotripsy in both my right and left ureters). Anyway, I'd like to be able to pay this emergency room doctor despite the summary treatment because it not only helped me lower my overall bill but was also a service I very much needed and desired. I have other bills, honest ones for honest work, I'd like to pay and can't. Someday I'd like to be able to.

I knew from my past lithotripsies at LGCH to expect somewhere around \$6000. I wasn't quite sure of this number and asked my urologist what to expect and told me around \$6000 also. At that time the average lithotripsy list price was probably slightly over \$20,000. By law in California, uninsured patients can only be billed at 25% of that. "Litho-I" aka the "Western Kidney Stone Center" (including my urologist also) billed at the fair market price and was profitable (it's in the "goodwill" lawsuit brought against Tenet, a good case considering how immensely more profitable this business became for El Camino Hospital, doubling their list price to \$43,000 after they acquired it).

Anyway, my urologist was curious what an uninsured patient like myself would be billed and waited with me by the phone as his secretary called the LGCH lithotripsy facility to arrange for the procedure. We heard the prices had gone up a little. Then his jaw dropped as he heard the rest of it. The first number we heard was \$80,000 (I remember when they used be that high 3 decades ago). Then some mercy, a 'correction' or something, somewhere around \$40,000. And then more relief, since I was uninsured, only around \$11,000 (but at the time I didn't know that the law required this discount) thinking to myself "Oh, what a wonderful hospital!". And wishing to question this 'bargain' no further lest they change their mind. Because at the time the way the "Western Kidney Stone Center" had been promoted in their literature from my previous lithotripsies there and the sophisticated 'cutting edge' nature of the procedure, led me to believe it was the only facility on the west coast that had the ability to do them. After all, my urologist (as well as my previous one until a change in my insurance required me to find a new one) both did their lithotripsies exclusively at LGCH.

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## Valley Med: "Our doors are always open"

What I didn't know is what Valley Med taught me the year after (2010) when I showed up at their door with the familiar acute pain, knowing I could no longer afford to go back to LGCH. They treated the pain, did the imaging and put me on Tamusolin (Flomax), pain Rx's, and later, after some tests, Potassium Citrate: a highly effective preventative that's been known about for decades.

I had to return once or twice when the pain became unmanageable. They explained that 80% of people with 5mm stones pass them. I didn't believe it. And kept waiting for them to come up with the lithotripsy and inquiring about it. On my last visit when the pain began to intensify, expecting the worst, which strangely never happened as I was all 'hooked up' and prepared for it. In fact, it dissipated totally. After they 'cut me free' and wondering why they weren't coming up with the lithotripsy, I told them "The message I'm getting is that you want me back here!". The attendant opened his arms: "Our doors are always open". I never did return. And learned what a powerful pain killer Tamusolin is, that helped me pass the stone as well. And shortly after, another 5mm one.

The after-effects of a lithotripsy (particularly from the stent, until it's later removed) is uncomfortable and not all that desirable. Even if this procedure was free, it's not one I'd choose to have. Nor am I planning on having any more of them. And wondering if *any* of the lithotripsies were necessary at all. And wondering why El Camino Hospital's urology dept., instead of profiteering on people like myself, doesn't hire some urologists who know how to prevent them. Like Dr. Rajesh Shinghal at Valley Med who put me on Potassium Citrate which I take religiously -- I'm way overdue for a stone. And have a lot of unanswered questions about it all. El Camino Hospital owes some people refunds. Which will become more than evident when a full and proper review is done on *all* of my lithotripsies at LGCH. Which their CEO has opposed.