

Is There a Doctor on Board?

Elena Volozhanina, MD

[N A J Med Sci. 2010;3(3): 152.]

We were somewhere in the middle of Atlantic Ocean when the captain of the airplane announced: "Is there a doctor on the plane?" I thought to myself: "I don't like flying, forget doing anything else, there must be at least one more doctor on this plane; I am not the only one ... At least, I need a colleague..." I counted to three, got up and went to the stewardess: "I'm a doctor".

The man was lying down on three chairs in the end of the plane, looking frightened, pale and sweaty. Poor thing - he was flying to visit his daughter, was in a rush and forgot to take his medications for blood pressure. I was calculating his (and our) chances having a heart attack right here, in front of my eyes, when the captain himself came to us. The captain wanted to know if we would have to turn around and land in Iceland. My patient got so scared that I thought he is going to have a stroke on top the questionable MI.

"Give me 2 minutes, captain and I will tell you" – said I.

"What do we have: BP machine, medications?"

"No, doctor, we have menthol and something else, we do not know"- the reply was encouraging.

"Just bring everything what you have, please."

I don't take my stethoscope on the plane, as you can imagine, nor do I carry the pharmacy with me. All what the crew was able to offer was: menthol (very calming, by the way), calcium carbonate (you are not going to use the bathroom

until the end of this flight), Tylenol, and furosemide – the choice that I would have never imagined on a plane.

To take his vital signs were like a breeze: heart rate and respirations. That's it. Yes, not blood pressure, no pulse ox, nothing. You just look in the man's eyes and ask yourself: "Why do I have to be the only doctor on the plane?"

OK. It is not a question, this is the reality, stop talking, start doing something. The rest of the exam did not take too long.

I have to mention, that in two days I had to start my residency in the United States. I didn't think about it, didn't think about the impact it might have caused if my patient would have died.

I felt very sorry for him; he did not want to land the plane, he wanted to see his daughter.

So, I remembered my grandmother who always was touching her temples when she had high blood pressure. I gave my patient furosemide, gave him a little orange juice. He felt better: no shortness of breath, no pain, no headache. I decided that we could make it to JFK, but we need an ambulance next to the plane.

Meanwhile, my new patient did not let me leave him, even for a second: I had to have someone stand next to him while I went to the bathroom.

An hour before we landed the man was sitting and talking and eating as if nothing had ever happened. We cancelled the ambulance.

He walked off the plane without help, he was very happy. I called him the next day and the next week. He was fine.

After we landed another passenger came by: "Thank you, I am a doctor, too, I just don't like flying, never mind working during the flight". I said: "You are welcome."

Received 06/30/ 2010; Accepted 07/05/ 2010

Elena Volozhanina, MD

Department of Medicine

Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center

Harvard medical School

1000 Broadway, Chelsea, MA 02150

Tel: 617-660-6700 Fax: 617-660-6702

Email: evolozha@caregroup.org