A METAPHOR FOR PHYSICIANS AND SURGEONS IN TRAINING by Dr. Richard Mathias

As physicians and surgeons in training, there are many demands placed upon you for the skills, knowledge and attitudes expected of a graduating medical student. In DPAS we add to these demands and it is not always clear to you, the recipient and objective of these demands, just where they fit into clinical practice. This story is an attempt to put this into some perspective.

The outline of this story is far from uniquely mine, but some of the expansions are my own.

One fine day, you are out for a stroll beside a river. In looking at the water you see someone coming down the river calling out for help. You assess your skills and realize that you are capable of attempting a rescue of this person so you plunge into the water and pull the person to shore. They are now safely on shore but before they can do more than thank you another person is calling for help in the river so you plunge in again to pull that person to shore, again effecting a rescue. Again and again a person is coming down the river so fast that you have no time except to keep trying to rescue persons who are at risk.

You are now also at risk from the effort you are expending to rescue the people from the river. But you have colleagues who can help and you quickly organize a team so that each person coming down the river can be rescued while allowing each rescuer time to recover so that they can be ready for the next rescue. And this is good and necessary.

You can now take some time to look at the river and try to determine if the river currents are such that they would have been carried to shore without your efforts or whether there is a way to use the strength of the flow to get them to shore with less effort or more effectively. Using the efforts of the team most efficiently and effectively. And this is good and necessary.

Once the team is large enough to give you some time, you can now go to those who have been rescued to make sure that they are all right and that the rescue has been successful. Making sure that they do not have adverse consequences of the rescue effort itself and that they are recovering successfully from being immersed in the water. Evaluating whether the rescue was successful is one of the tasks you need to do. And this is good and necessary.

With a successful rescue, you now have time, because the other members of the team can rescue people from the river and make sure that the rescue is successful, to find out why these people were in the river in the first place. What is going on upstream that gets them into the river and into difficulty? Are they rafting down the river but getting into rapids that overturn the raft and throw them into the water? Is there some structural defect in the bridge upstream that is throwing them into the water without their consent? Is someone persuading them that getting in the river is a good idea and is without risk? You now have time to talk to this population at risk to find out the upstream issues and to determine if you can intervene in those risks to reduce the number of people coming downstream at risk of drowning. If they need to be in the river to get food or water, can it be done more safely? If they must travel down the river, can you make that trip safer?

Not everyone can go upstream to try to prevent the need for rescue but if someone does not make that effort, then rescues will be required as long as the conditions have not changed.

DPAS is a course that describes how you can determine if your rescue is successful by looking at the outcomes of the rescues. How do we determine if our rescue is needed and how do we determine if our rescue is successful? It is also a course that looks at the population needing rescue to try to determine the upstream causes of the need for rescue and maybe, if we do that well, how we can prevent the conditions that will require rescue downstream.

Ultimately we all travel down the river to reach the end of our journey. As physicians and surgeons we can help with the journey and be there at the end to make rescue unnecessary and unwanted by those on their journey. We can concentrate on rescue when the journey goes wrong or try to make the journey as smooth as possible by making sure that what we do is of more benefit than harm, that the people we rescue need and want our help, and that we are there by their consent for their journey as they want to make it.