

An Alien Inside Me - Part One: A Guide for Hospitalization Support in Germany

By Karen Van Antwerp

In some ways, I liken my recent medical experiences to that of an American television drama, except I was playing the ill patient...

In this article I hope to give you a window into these experiences and offer some suggestions if you should ever find yourself or someone you love in a similar situation while living here in Germany. While I am not an expert on healthcare, I have learned firsthand the differences in the medical care systems in the USA and in Europe.

1. Contacts: Cell phones are not always dependable. If you are ill and have medication in you, you may not be able to use your cell phone. I recommend having a piece of paper in your wallet with contact information for you and your loved ones.

2. Theme song: Perhaps I watched too much of the old Alley McBeal television sitcoms years ago. The main character always had a theme song. During this experience having a theme song has helped me through the toughest of the tough days. One day mine was Chumbawamba, "I get knocked down, but I get up again;"

another it was the Shirelle hit from 1961, "Mama said there'll be days like this, There'll would be days like this my mama said." I know it is silly, yet these hospitals were quiet, lonely and I had all the time in the world to think of things to bolster my spirit.

pain and are on a stretcher in an ambulance with its sirens going off. It is really tough to find the silver lining. During one of my visits, the doctor said you must have immediate surgery or be paralyze. This was when I had to do something to make me smile inside. My husband was there

by my side through all of this and he kept me entertained with youtube videos to distract me as needles and tubes were inserted. When he wasn't there I started to give nick names to the stream of medical specialists I met in those short 8 weeks. I had one doctor who reminded me of Bon Jovi, another was McDreamy and then there was the



A 2D sonograph showing Karen's cyst

3. A Sense of Humor. This is perhaps the most important support to your mental well being in a stressful situation, particularly when your caregivers don't speak English and you don't understand everything. It also comes in handy when you have immense

one who looked like Gino Vannelli. I also had one called "the Man," as he had over 40 years experience and was the expert. Ken Doll, well he was just as his nickname said. He reminded me of my childhood Ken. Then on the road to recovery, I began teasing my husband my insurance card will be denied due to being over



used these past few months just like a credit card that has reached its limits. While this is not true, it makes me, as a guest here in this country, very humbled by the healthcare system that helped me so much in my time of need.

4. Trust. Just because you are in a foreign country and the nurses, staff and some of the doctors do not either speak English or speak it clearly, trust and respect them. They are the professionals and you are the patient. Sure, the policy and procedures may be different in each hospital in each country. You need to accept that this is NOT the USA and it will be ok. In this world of Google, so many times I have searched a medical condition or read my own MRI (MRT in German) and either try to self diagnosis or think I knew more than they did. This is wrong and I learned this through this experience. Of course, you are welcome to get a second opinion on your health as we did for my "alien" condition.

5. Have a little faith. I sought support from my husband (my knight in shining armor) for his love and his translation skills of German medical terms and

procedures. I also looked toward my faith, our family and friends. I had set up a private group on Facebook so those closet to me could monitor my health updates. The medication I was taking had side effects



that made me forgetful. I had trouble concentrating, and I could not email each and every friend updates on my condition. By using Whatsapp and Facebook, my husband and I could share news of my health on a regular basis.

6. Have a back-up plan in the event of disaster. My husband was taken ill unexpectedly and hospitalized the night before my surgery at a different

hospital. Thus, I had less than 24 hours to find someone to drive me to my surgery an hour from my home at 5 am. This was a time I dug deep inside myself and the strong upbringing I had, and depended on the love I share with my husband. I told myself, "I am from Detroit, I am strong, and I can handle anything which comes my way." At one point I envisioned driving myself there and just leaving the car for him to pick up a week later. I called AWCD members Kiki Ragab and Kien Schepers, who were recruited within minutes and were there for me. Kiki arrived in the wee hours of the morning to drive me and support me through the operations, and Kien sat next to my bedside as the Oberarzt explained the surgery I had just had.

The members of AWCD have been a great support to me, and I thank each of you who contacted me and offered help. I hope by sharing these tips from my experience, I can give something back to you all as well.

Editor's Note: Thank you to Karen for sharing her story. In the Summer issue of the Rad we will have Part Two of her article.