

Office Test Alone Can't Diagnose COPD

DEAR DR. ROACH: I am a healthy 70-year-old woman. The only prescription medication I take is for dry eyes. I recently visited my new primary physician for the first time, and she had me do a breathing test, where I exhaled into a tube to measure airflow. I was told to breathe deeply and exhale completely into the tube three times in succession. It took less than a minute to complete. It is apparently a routine test she orders for new patients.

She then told me I have COPD, on the basis of that test alone. She asked if I had ever smoked or been exposed to secondhand smoke. That was her only question -- coughing or shortness of breath was never mentioned. I have never smoked, but my father was a smoker when I was growing up. I actually do have a slightly productive cough most mornings. I probably walk about 10 miles a week, and I do notice some shortness of breath on long uphill sections, though I can walk briskly in level areas for miles with no problem.

She said it is not advanced enough to require an inhaler at this time. I am bothered by this very easy "diagnosis" on the basis of one simple test. I wonder if I should ask to be referred to a pulmonologist for a more thorough evaluation. -- O.P.

ANSWER: The test your doctor performed is called office spirometry, and it is useful for monitoring known pulmonary diseases, especially COPD and asthma. However, by itself, it is inadequate to make the diagnosis of COPD, which I am not sure you have.

The diagnosis of COPD is made in people with persistent respiratory symptoms, usually shortness of breath or coughing. Spirometry will usually show obstruction to airflow. Formal pulmonary function testing, which is an extensive process taking an hour or so with a skilled and experienced technician, is ideal for determining severity.

The problem with getting a breathing test in someone who has no significant symptoms is that you can find someone whose test results are at or just below the lower limit of normal, and the diagnosis is unclear. The prognosis for people with mild airway obstruction but with no symptoms of COPD is much better than for people with COPD and who continue to smoke. For this reason, using spirometry as a screening test for everyone is not recommended.

Without knowing the exact results of your spirometry, I suspect you do not have COPD, given your absence of smoking and your extremely mild symptoms. A comprehensive exam by a pulmonologist would be definitive and may help you be less anxious about the results you have now.

DEAR DR. ROACH: I saw your recent column on enlarged prostate, and I have the same problem. I have no history of cancer, but I do have a high PSA and symptoms of frequent urination. Because of other medications, I cannot take ibuprofen, so I am curious if Tylenol has the same anti-inflammatory effect. I do occasionally use Tylenol for headaches and arthritis pain. -- J.B.

ANSWER: The exact mechanism of how Tylenol reduces pain remains a mystery. However, it is not an anti-inflammatory drug like ibuprofen, so would not be expected to have the benefit in prostate symptoms that some men get from taking an ibuprofen at bedtime.

***Dr. Roach regrets that he is unable to answer individual questions, but will incorporate them in the column whenever possible. Readers may email questions to ToYourGoodHealth@med.cornell.edu.

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Trump's Shameful Georgia Call

President Donald Trump has turned a narrow electoral defeat into a bid for infamy.

His goal in the post-election interlude has been more and more explicitly to overturn the results of the election. Indeed, a couple of weeks ago he tweeted simply, "#OVERTURN."

We now know, thanks to a recording of his phone conversation with Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger from over the weekend, how far he's gone to pressure state officials to join him in this reprehensible goal. His hour-long lobbying of Raffensperger to declare him the winner in the state is among the worst things an American president has ever been caught saying on the record.

There is now no doubt that Trump lost Georgia. Both machine and hand recounts have confirmed a Biden victory of fewer than 12,000 votes. Trump has been agitating for a signature audit, and state officials examined a statistically significant sample of 15,000 absentee ballot envelopes in Cobb County. They found 10 mismatched signatures, but the voters in question all vouchsafed for the legitimacy of the ballots when contacted by investigators.

Georgia has certified its results multiple times and appointed its electors in time to meet the "safe harbor" deadline under federal law, when they are supposed to be considered final and conclusive by the federal government.

Yet, here comes Trump with an LBJ-style bout of arm-twisting to get Raffensperger to declare all of that a grievous mistake.

The power differential between a president of the United States and a state secretary of state is vast -- Trump is the most powerful man on the planet whereas Raffensperger isn't even the most powerful man in Georgia.

Trump put Raffensperger in the inherently awkward position of having to tell him "no" over and over -- snowing him with a variety of numbers for supposed illegal votes, making him parry wild accusations, mocking him and threatening him with vague legal repercussions and, implicitly, with the end of his political career.

There is a reason that Raffensperger didn't take any of the reported prior 18 attempted calls from the White House.

Still, to his great credit, he did indeed tell Trump "no" politely and firmly. Of the two elected officials on the call, only one was calm, reasonable and cogent -- and it wasn't the president.

Trump was repetitive and ill-informed. He had no idea what charges had been debunked weeks ago. He didn't, or couldn't, distinguish between true and false information. He was fuzzy on the details of his own legal case. He retailed conspiracy theories about ballots being burned and voting machines being removed that would be embarrassing if your uncle shared them on Facebook.

The only thing that mattered to him was getting Raffensperger to pronounce him the winner -- legal process and facts be damned.

The problem with Trump has always been his highly personal view of the presidency, wherein institutions, constitutional principles and sheer propriety take a backseat to the felt needs of his ego.

At times in his presidency, this failing has been made to serve worthy ends, e.g., stoking economic growth and confirming record numbers of conservative judges as bragging points.

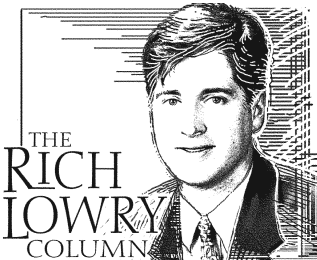
Since the election, though, this tendency has been particularly stark and unredeemed. His personal inability to accept the sting of defeat has led him, shamefully, to wage war on a legitimate election.

If he were to somehow succeed in his goal of overturning the result, he would subvert American democracy and irreparably harm our governing institutions, while stoking a constitutional crisis of a magnitude we've only experienced rarely in our history.

And for what? To avoid admitting that he lost.

Trump has gotten nowhere, except in convincing some Republican senators and members of Congress to indulge his insistence he really won. Every time the president hoped someone with authority over the election would bend his way, whether an elected official or judge, he's found someone like Raffensperger, dutiful and conscientious enough to say "no."

Rich Lowry is editor of the National Review.
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The Trump Legacy of Phoniness

One last con: President Donald Trump and first lady Melania Trump skipped out on their New Year's gala at Mar-a-Lago, where fans with too much money paid a thousand or so bucks singly because the Trumps were advertised to attend. But suddenly, the first scammers bailed and returned to the White House, leaving family members and other second fiddles to diddle those willing to be defrauded by the right-wing star-hucksters.

While the Trumps are world champion charlatans, there's no shortage of Bunco artists in Washington. Only too happy to join the Trumpster in his elaborate last-minute swindle to hold on to office by hook or crook was Ted Cruz. In a biopic, there's no obvious actor who would be cast as Trump. But Cruz would definitely be played by Snidely Whiplash of Rocky and Bullwinkle fame. Never mind that Whiplash is a star of animation. He IS Ted Cruz.

It's not that Sen. Cruz actually cares whether President Trump is successful. If The Donald falters, Cruz would like to lay claim to his 74 million voters. And Donald Trump has four years to falter.

Could he have badly blundered with his hour-long intimidation call threatening Georgia Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger? He threatened Raffensperger with "criminal" prosecution unless he suddenly were to "find" nearly 12,000 Trump votes in Georgia, which would reverse the state's election.

By the way, Brad Raffensperger, the loyal Republican, cast his ballot for Trump before he decided to steadfastly follow all the rules in counting the votes. Including now, when he politely turned down the president and his henchpersons. The question, among others, is how could they not know the call was being recorded? And Trump's four years out of office and being subject to criminal action hasn't even begun.

Four years is a long enough time for all the memories of the Trump years to evaporate: the coronavirus, the racism, the misogyny, the cruel xenophobia, the facile demagoguery. This is to say nothing of the fact that President Joe Biden will have time to create his own messes.

What the Trumpster base has not forgotten is why the millions favored Trump in the first place: the unfairness of the elite and their so-called experts (they lump all the real experts in with the phonies). They despised the intellectuals, many of whom talked a good game but little else, and felt they had suffered from affirmative action and foreign competition. They also believed that their old-fashioned cultural and religious beliefs were under attack.

And along came Donald Trump. He had already shown he has the grift gift. He had been born into wealth but also inherited a ruthlessness to do whatever it took to wriggle out of his ineptitude and achieve huge wealth in the process.

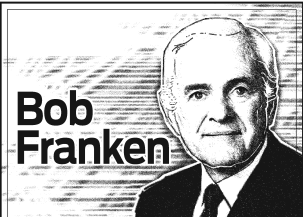
An old Southern expression is that The Donald is able to fall in a bucket of spit and come out smelling like a rose. Well, that's pretty close.

He has an instinctual ability for public relations. He will find some way to be in the spotlight. No matter how Joe Biden will try, Donald Trump will parlay the claim that he was cheated out of re-election into a justification to be favored next time around. He might succeed. Ted Cruz and the others can only hope he might not.

The only ultimate fight in the GOP will be between one of them and a "Never Trumper" like Mitt Romney. Romney pretends his motives are pure, but that's just his con. Call him Grift Romney, running his own sting versus a Democrat. Both will still be running against Donald Trump, still the center of attention, which is all he ever wanted.

Bob Franken is an Emmy Award-winning reporter who covered Washington for more than 20 years with CNN.

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