

Lotto Mania

Dr Tim Welborn

I am not a compulsive gambler, but I do buy a Lotto ticket from time to time. Buying a ticket does help you feel better about life, because it allows you to indulge in the short-term fantasy of becoming wealthy. I must confess also that I have used Lotto tickets as an incentive or bribe when I want to encourage patients to achieve targets. Most often, this has been to motivate an obese patient to achieve a modest weight reduction of perhaps 3 to 5 kilograms by diet and exercise, before their next appointment. It has helped sometimes.

I started buying the odd Lotto ticket after my wife and I visited New York in 1989. The occasion was a Festschrift for a prominent diabetes specialist, Dr Harold Rifkin, who practised in the Bronx. He was retiring after an eminent career as clinician, research, and educator in diabetes. In addition to the symposium's lectures that covered research and clinical frontiers in diabetes and were delivered by International authorities, there was a magnificent dinner held at the Museum of Modern Art. The speakers there described his multiple achievements, but inevitably some poked fun at the guest of honour. It was well known that he had married a wife who was rich, and that he often complained that as a physician he could never make enough money. So the apocryphal tale was told about his regular visits to the Synagogue, where he prayed to win Lotto. After many years of failing to achieve this goal, he went to the temple and complained "God why have you not answered my constant prayers??" A rumble of thunder followed, and then a voice "Harold, first you must buy a ticket"

Some years after that, I was working in my busy Wednesday morning Diabetes Clinic at Sir Charles Gairdner Hospital, when I got a phone call from the head of the Liver Unit. "Tim, please would you see this patient. He has had a liver transplant for alcohol-related liver disease which has been highly successful. But he has developed diabetes secondary to the immunosuppressive steroid therapy, and he will just not look after this properly". I said "send him down", and later that morning, a thin pleasant looking aboriginal patient walked in and sat down at my desk. The problem was that he would not prick his fingers to record blood sugar levels, a necessary discipline to enable adjustment of tablets and insulin treatment. "Why won't you check your blood sugar levels? ... "I don't want to, Doc"... "Look, mate, if you will prick your finger twice a day, before breakfast and dinner, and write the results down, I will buy you a Lotto ticket!" The patient seemed astonished, and after a pause he smiled and said "okay Doc". I send him out to the nurse educators to provide the equipment and to teach him the technique.

One week later, he walked in hesitantly, sat down, and passed across the desk a wrinkled piece of paper which had 14 scrawly numbers on it, the information we needed to treat his diabetes properly. As it happened, the hospital's shop was immediately below my Clinic room via convenient fire escape stairs, so I went straight down and purchased a Slik-Pik ticket, and handed it to him, and we got on with process of appropriate education and treatment.

The following Saturday, the published Lotto results indicated that a man of the same name had won \$3 million! When I got to the Clinic after the weekend, everyone seemed to know about it. My head nurse had phoned him at his home, and this was very noisy because many family members and friends had moved in. She shouted "was that Dr Welborn's ticket?". "Oh, I dunno whose ticket it was, nurse".

That is where the story ends. Except that my wife then insisted that if ever I buy Lotto tickets to incentivise patients, I must arrange to go halves.