

THE END OF ANTIBIOTICS?

There is a unique smell to hospitals, composed of equal parts illness, rubbing alcohol, fear, and hope. Few of us who have been in a hospital can forget that smell or the feelings it engenders. But underneath those memory-laden smells and feelings is the belief that in this place, this hospital, there is an army of men and women fighting for our lives, working to bring us back from the brink of death. We have learned, been taught, know, that this army is winning the war against disease, that antibiotics have made an end to most bacterial diseases. It is a comforting belief. Unfortunately, what we “know” couldn’t be more wrong.

Late in 1993, as *Newsweek*’s Sharon Begley reported, infectious disease specialist Dr. Cynthia Gilbert entered the room of a patient with a long-term kidney condition. Her face was set in the mask that physicians have used for centuries when coming to pass sentence on their patients. The man was not fooled; he took it in at a glance.

“You’re coming to tell me I’m dying,” he said.

She paused, then nodded curtly. “There’s just nothing we can do.”

They each paused, then. One contemplating the end of life; the other, the failure of her craft and the loss that goes with it.

Dr. Gilbert took a deep and shuddering breath. “I’m sorry,” she said.

The man said nothing; for what he was contemplating, there were no words. His physician nodded sharply as if settling her mind. Then she turned and left him, facing once again the long hall filled with the smells of illness, rubbing alcohol, fear, hope, and questions for which she had no answer.