Here’s where this story begins.

Upon hearing that my flight was canceled and I wouldn’t be able to get back home to Raleigh until the following day, I blurted out the F-word right there at the airport gate for all to hear.

Do I have your attention?

First – let me clarify which F-word I’m talking about: Flexible. It’s a great word. One that we should be using every day, all day long, in healthcare.

I joined the TeleHealth Services team in late 2014 as an Account Administrator, a role which takes me all over the country to visit the hospitals who use our Tigr family of interactive patient education TV systems. During my most recent trip to West Virginia to visit my clients and good friends at Charleston Area Medical Center, I learned a thing or two about flexibility.

When I arrived at CAMC Teays Valley Hospital to train the staff on their newly installed Tigr system, my on-site contact Beverly greeted me and showed me to the conference room that she had reserved for the education sessions. We set up the room and turned on the TV, then clicked to the Tigr home channel.

Only to discover that the Tigr home channel wasn’t displayed on the TV.

Across the hallway was the doctors’ lounge, complete with a TV. Beverly ran around the corner to get permission to commandeer it for the day. I then wandered in and out of the lounge throughout the day, with CAMC employees in tow, ready to hijack the remote and TV from weary docs who were on break and hoping to catch a few moments of their favorite shows. When I explained the Tigr system and the training that I was doing, all were good sports. Many even participated, jumping in and asking questions as I gave demos of the system. None of them had planned on attending Tigr training that day, but lo and behold, there they were, eager and willing to learn more, especially when the subject of boosting HCAHPS scores came up! I have to say that my friends at CAMC are nothing, if not flexible. What a valuable and necessary attribute to have in the healthcare world.

It made me think back to my days as a patient education coordinator. Thinking about flexiblility on an even greater level, I recalled an experience that made a huge impression on me when I was knee-deep in Y2K preparations. Those of you who were working in healthcare then probably remember a shared sense of panic and the fear of the unknown. I remember that in spite of every assurance issued by our patient education software vendors, we had to have a backup plan in place in case the technology failed. Mine was to list every major diagnosis or procedure for every unit in my hospital, print 10 copies of patient education handouts for each of them, package them in file boxes, and make rounds to distribute them accordingly. As I rolled around a cart with my Y2K “backup kits,” nurses gathered and looks of panic spread like wildfire.

“So... what if we run out of handouts?”

“What if we have to discharge somebody with a diagnosis that’s not in the file box?”

The ‘what ifs’ continued as if I was standing in front of a firing squad. They didn’t stop until a nurse manager on one unit finally intervened.
“Stop your whining,” she commanded. “You run out of handouts? You got a patient with a diagnosis that’s not in the box? Here’s your backup plan.” She pulled a ream of blank paper out of the printer and dramatically dropped it down on the nurses’ station. She then slapped her pen on top of it. “You teach,” she said, “and you write out the important things by hand. Pen and paper. That’s all you need. You went to nursing school – all of you. Patient education is part of your job. The tools we have – software, handouts, videos, everything else – it’s here to help and enhance – not do your job for you.”

And there you have it. Tough love with a little F-word thrown in. I couldn’t have said it better myself.

It’s the same kind of no-nonsense, critical thinking I had to draw upon the morning I was leaving Charleston to head back home to Raleigh. Three hours after my flight was scheduled to depart, the delay officially changed to a cancellation on the electronic marquee. My fellow passengers and I groaned in unison. After another hour or so passed, the airline attendant at the gate called individual passengers up to the counter to discuss their rebooking options.

“Passenger Glenn?” She frowned when I approached. “I’m really sorry. We’re not going to be able to get you back to Raleigh today. With a red-eye out tonight to DC and a connection in Detroit in the morning, the earliest I could get you back is 11 am tomorrow...”

Fantastic. This had to be a bad dream, I thought. I had WAY too much to do and couldn’t wait another day to get back home. The attendant could tell by the look on my face that her suggested itinerary wasn’t going to fly. Literally.

She frowned. “I’m so sorry. This is the best we can do.”

Wait, I told myself. Chill out. Use your head. An airplane is not the only way to get back to North Carolina. I knew what I had to do. I knew what I had to be. I even said it out loud. “It’s okay. I’m fine. I’m flexible,” I said through clenched teeth, as I made my way to the rental car counter.

An hour later, I was cruising down Interstate 77. The drive was surprisingly pleasant. The sun was shining; the rental car drove like an absolute dream. For miles upon miles, my view was nothing but stretches of beautiful mountains that I would have otherwise missed out on from a plane ride home. Considering how rattled I’d been just hours before, I felt surprisingly calm. This was sheer bliss! There are unexpected rewards to being flexible. Who knew?

I was thankful.

And just plain happy, considering this entire experience had started off with a canceled flight, a sudden change of travel plans, and a public proclamation, that while not heartfelt at first, eventually manifested into truth for me.

F-word and all.