XII

Advice From an Infidel

"Knowledge is the principal thing; therefore get knowledge: and with all thy getting get understanding."

Proverbs, 4:7

Is your flesh crawling? I hope so. I hope I have instilled some doubt into you, some doubt about the efficacy of the ceremonies of American medicine men. In doubt lies the beginning of wisdom.

If you can't put faith in your doctor, what can you do? First, forget the faith. That word shouldn't apply to doctors. Next, do some hard thinking. You want physical immortality, of course. Well, that's impossible. Then do you want to prolong the years of your life? Not at all, if that means being blind, deaf, doddering, incontinent, a stinking Strudbrug, a painful burden to your children, a living memento mori. You want to live in full possession of your faculties, to enjoy eating and drinking and sex, to be vigorous and alert.

So how do you achieve those glorious goals? I can offer you a few guide points.

Don't regard your doctor as a wizard but as a mortal man who sees in the world a microcosm of ailments. And because of his specialized vision remember that he is shortsighted. He wants to solve one problem and he often can, but to what end? What's the use of treating rheumatoid arthritis with effective antimalarial drugs if blindness may occur? Why order iodized salt to prevent goiter and end up with severe acne in adolescents? How valuable is an organ transplant when the condition that caused the trouble in the original organ persists (as arteriosclerosis, in the case of Dr. Bluiberg)?

Don't expect more of the doctor than an honest and intelligent application of his learning. That means what he does he should do well and what he can't do he should let alone or get help in doing it. It also means that he should not order laboratory work as a routine without specific need for it, and he should explain its necessity to you.

Don't ask him to work miracles. He cannot resurrect the dead nor restore power to limbs paralyzed by severance of the spinal cord. He cannot foretell the exact hour of birth nor prognosticate the moment when life will depart. He cannot make the blind see without eyes, nor the deaf hear without auditory nerves. He can't even promise your backache will not recur nor your hair not turn gray.

Don't forget there are no top secrets in medical care. Doctors like to crow about their successes: they hasten to publish their good results. Once a procedure is no longer experimental, its use becomes universal. Once a drug establishes its merit, every doctor will prescribe it when it is indicated. Only charlatans pretend to have secret remedies. The day after the cure for cancer is discovered, your doctor will know about it. Don't think anyone else knows now and won't tell.

Don't demand of the doctor the tenderness and love you may be missing in your life. "A kiss on your hand makes you feel good but a diamond bracelet lasts a long time." The doctor is not a substitute for wife or mother or husband or father. His job is to keep you well and fit.

That means a radical change in your attitude toward doctors. Don't be a gullible participant in the séance. Don't regard doctors as wizards, omniscient and possibly omnipotent. Remember the dialectic relationship: without you he wouldn't be a doctor. Therefore—don't let your body be poisoned by paradoxically useful and useless drugs. Ask, ask, ask about the dangers in the prescriptions. Let the doctor think you're an overcautious nut. His opinion won't hurt you as much as a harmful medication. Don't submit yourself to diagnostic procedures of doubtful value and doubtless possibilities for harm. Insist on knowing why they are being ordered. Don't be a guinea pig for the latest medical fads just because the Joneses are falling for them. And don't go to the other extreme—don't set your judgment against your doctor's as to what is good and what is bad in medicine. Presumably he gets his information from better sources than you do. Just make sure he knows what he is doing and why. Your own common sense must be used. If a technique or a procedure or a drug doesn't make sense to you, ask your doctor to explain. Don't be put off by medical double-talk; if he says you won't understand, rest assured he doesn't ei-
ther. Making him speak straight English will make him think straight too.

Don’t think that by suing the doctor when he makes a mistake that you’re going to improve the quality of medical care. All you’re doing is making his malpractice insurance rate go up and that expense is inevitably added to your bill. Malpractice suits make lawyers richer, not you healthier. You’re mistaken if you think a legal judgment can alter a mystic ritual.

Don’t interfere in the doctor’s practice, except to poke fun at his antics. You don’t know the details of what is necessary to turn the art into a science. Well-meaning reformers tried to cure alcoholism by Prohibition and ended up with Capone. Demanding medical care audits, uniformity of records, compulsory laboratory testing—all lead to an increase of burdensome bureaucracy and an increase in the cost of medical care, not in its quality. Likewise, don’t get carried away by the idea that Soviet-style polyclinics or British-style panel medicine will automatically bring about superior medical care. Maybe you won’t have to wait so long for the witch doctor to come, but when he does he’ll have the same old bag of tricks. Nor is prepaid health insurance the answer. What difference will it make if the witch doctor’s said by the state if the mummer’s the same?

Remember that, although doctors make a great deal of money, money is seldom their sole aim when they treat you. They actually want you to get well. Don’t attribute mercenary motives to them when they advise an operation or diagnostic tests. Just be sure that the reasons they give for those procedures make sense to you. Doctors are not conscious charlatans or ignorant frauds, but they are often intellectually lazy and even oftener so much in a hurry that they do instead of think.

Change doctors if the one you have is not candid with you. Change if his treatment is not giving results or if it has added complications to what you started with. Change if he promises miraculous cures. Change if he treats you like a child or an idiot. Change if he gets angry when you question him about his diagnosis or treatment. There are plenty of good doctors around. You have to look for them and from personal experience I can tell you the search will not be easy, but it is well worth the trouble.

“Every country has the government it deserves” runs the adage. And every country has the doctors it deserves. If you want to get away from witchcraft, start throwing out your own superstitions. Be open-minded and receptive to fresh ideas. If you hanker for the good old days when Doc tramped through the snow carrying a heavy black bag, you’ll keep right on being satisfied with Doctor in a shiny office radiating sympathy. What’s needed in this country is a new kind of medical practice, one that won’t be dependent on your good will or your willingness to be amused, one whose function will be to prevent illness and to cure or alleviate those illnesses that can’t be prevented, one that will help you to reach your goal of a long, happy and healthy life.

How that will come about I don’t know, but I do know that an intelligent, informed public can help to eliminate much of the ceremonial nonsense that attends present-day medical practice.

I didn’t mean to end by giving advice but I did, anyway. That’s what comes of being a doctor for so long. Out of habit I don the mask and give a solemn opinion.
Do you trust your doctor? Does he really know what he's doing? To most Americans, the answer to such questions is an immediate "Of course," and to this extent our blind faith in the wisdom and powers of physicians is little different from the belief of primitive peoples in their witch doctors' incantations and spells.

THE MEDICINE MEN is a well-documented and witty book which explodes the myth of quality medical care in the United States. Dr. Leonard Tushnet, a respected doctor of almost forty years' experience, here analyzes many of the recent "breakthroughs" in medical technology, diagnosis and treatment, and finds that they have been dangerously overemphasized and not fully understood by many in the medical profession. THE MEDICINE MEN gives the layman an insider's view of both general practitioners and specialists--internists, obstetricians, psychiatrists, gynecologists and surgeons, among others--and some of their commonly used and often dangerous treatments. The author also casts serious doubt on the effectiveness of some of our most honored articles of medical faith: the annual check-up, laboratory "tests," and medical "consultations."

This is a book which pulls no punches. It is not an indictment of all doctors, but it does offer sound advice on how to tell a competent physician from a highly educated witch doctor. THE MEDICINE MEN is a book which could conceivably save your life, and is required reading before you keep your next appointment with your doctor.

Dr. Leonard Tushnet has recently retired from his New Jersey Medical practice after almost forty years of service. He is the author of numerous medical and historical articles, and has had more than sixty short stories published in the past ten years. Two of his previous books have dealt with the history of the Warsaw Ghetto.

THE MEDICINE MEN is his first full-length analysis of the profession to which he has devoted most of his life.