

Misunderstanding Usually Found Major Cause Of Complaints Registered Against Doctors

Editor's note: This is the first of three dispatches by last year's president of the American Medical Association examining misunderstanding between the public and the medical profession.

By DR. ELMER HESS
Written for United Press

What do people think about doctors? Does the public respect the medical profession, have faith in physicians. Or is there a growing animosity toward medical men?

From the things you sometimes read or the comments you hear you might get the idea people are pretty disgruntled about the men who serve their medical needs. How many times have you encountered criticisms like these?

Doctors are impersonal, they are curt to people who aren't seriously ill and belittle their problems.

"Doctors charge too much..." "Doctors add to a patient's bill when they find out he carries insurance..."

Sought Reactions
Well, I can tell you that during my term of office as president of the American Medical Association I got some first hand information on this subject. In my extensive travels I questioned all kinds of Americans to find out their feelings toward doctors. And I studied every letter of complaint I received.

It seems to me the number of complaints the president of the world's largest medical organization receives ought to be a pretty good means of measuring the extent of dissatisfaction around the country. I was actually amazed how few letters I received. In a country with a population of over 160 million people I received less than 1,000 letters of complaint and I personally answered each one.

Attempt to Clear Air
Within the last few years the medical profession has set up mechanisms to handle real or imagined grievances. We call them grievance or mediation committees and a majority of state and county medical societies have them today. These are committees made up of doctors to whom a person can take a complaint about a physician or some aspect of medical service. You get a fair hearing before such a committee. And an honest attempt is made to settle problems fairly.

One thing that doctors have learned in their recent efforts to reduce complaints is that simple misunderstanding is usually the major cause. Often, when both sides to the controversy

come to understand the whole situation, complaints vanish in thin air.

An Example
The medical profession traditionally has kept tabs on its own members; policed its own ranks, so to speak, in an effort to make sure doctors conform to the highest ethical concepts of the practice of medicine. And just to show you that doctors don't whitewash a colleague when they find he has violated an ethical principle or has not acted in accordance with good standards of medicine, let me tell you a true story.

An Oakland, Calif., woman had surgery and when she received her bill, felt her surgeon had overcharged her. Even though she was wealthy, the woman refused to pay this bill. She took her complaint to the Alameda County Medical Society. Their grievance committee heard her story.

"Of course, I could pay the fee charged," she said, "but it is many times what is charged for a similar operation in this area."

No Price Quoted
The committee investigated and learned that her physician had failed to tell her prior to the operation what the charge would be. The AMA, to prevent such misunderstanding, encouraged all physicians to discuss fees in advance with patients and to itemize the bill for clarity. When the committee suggested to the physician that he reduce his bill to make it closer to the going rate for such surgery, he refused. Then the grievance committee took its stand. It told him that since he had not agreed upon a fee prior to the operation, he should accept the usual fee. If he did not do so, the committee said, it would defend the patient's position if the case went to court. Needless to say, the physicians accepted an "average" fee.

Cases Not Alike
However, there's one thing patients sometimes don't realize. No two cases are exactly alike. There may be good reasons why Mrs. Jones may pay less for a medical service than someone in your family does for a similar procedure. I once treated two men who were neighbors. Both had similar symptoms and both had to have surgery. In one case the man had a condition easily corrected. The other unfortunately had a malignancy so his operative result wasn't good.

The man with the malignancy

checked with his neighbor, found there was a difference in the operative results, and refused to pay his bill. Did we attempt to collect? Of course not. This story merely illustrates the many variations in what often appear to be identical cases. That's why it is difficult to establish definite average fees for specific conditions.

Mostly 'Misunderstanding'
The matter of fees does sometimes result in justified complaints. There are occasional instances of overcharging. A few

doctors may hike a bill when patients have inquired. But I'd be willing to bet that when you hear a complaint about overcharging or fee hiking, it is generally because of a misunderstanding of the situation rather than because the physician is guilty. The medical profession itself is working hard to weed out any cases of abuse of this type.

As for the complaint that doctors are curt and impersonal, to say that doctors are tremendously busy doesn't really justify

such attitudes. Our profession is continually impressing upon its members the importance of treating each patient as a special individual, not just as a clinical case. Our efforts to build better doctor-patient relationships help reestablish the qualities of kindness and patience that made the horse and buggy doctor such a revered man. We're seeking to train tomorrow's doctors this philosophy.

Even so, remember that doctors are human, too. They get tired, they have personal prob-

lems, they don't always reflect sunshine and light. But they try

Tomorrow, Dr. Hess writes about the fantastic success of pre-paid medical care through insurance programs.

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Around Hollywood

Las Vegas, Nev. — (UP) — A "ghost hotel" that's been Las Vegas' glamorous white elephant at last is coming to life as the gambling town's most supercolossal spa.

A year ago Las Vegas had rolled snake eyes and the town sang business blues.

White hotels opened, closed and changed hands giddily.

Today the community appears to be more prosperous. The Royal Nevada and Dunes hotels, once shuttered, are open again.

The airport reports it's handling 10,000 more visitors so far this year than it did the first two months of 1956.

Now another new hotel, the \$5 million Tropicana, finished but sitting empty for a year, will open its doors to take advantage of the better business.

Visitors who've toured the Tropicana rave that it's the most elegant in the country—and the most costly of this resort area. One booster claims it makes Miami's famous Fontainebleau "look like last year's tract house."

Ground was broken on the Tropicana in April of 1955. But authorities objected to one of the owners and turned down the hotel's application for a gambling license. New owners have taken over, and the Tropicana is set to open April 3 with Eddie Fisher singing in Las Vegas for the first time.

Touring the "ghost hotel" is eerie, even though the place is beginning to liven up with re-

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United Press Correspondent

hearing chorus girls. The 300 rooms feature tasteful regency—modern decor—marble coffee tables, greekian statues, antique-looking chests, crystal chandeliers and private balconies. The supper club where New York's Monte Prober will present shows has glass walls and nine stages including one that nearly circles the room a la Cinerama.

The hotel also features a 40-foot high fountain in front, a 10-foot waterfall, roof gardens and a scalloped swimming pool with music piped underwater.

Shocked Gamblers.
Veteran gamblers are shocked, but the Tropicana owners insist gambling will be secondary. Thus the hotel will violate all Las Vegas rules for parting the customer with his money. The guest usually must not be provided with any distractions that might keep him from the crap table—no windows or clocks so he can't see what time of day it is, no TV sets, tennis courts, tempting restaurants or sports.

But the formal, wood-paneled Tropicana casino has both windows and clocks. There's also a TV room, tennis courts, badminton courts, putting green and plushy Gourmet's Dining Room operated by Perino's restaurants.

As one hotel worker says, "class now has come to Las Vegas."

HATS FOR HORSES
Newmarket, England—(UP)—Saddle-maker F. E. Gibson said Saturday he is branching out into the hat business for horses. He said he has asked a hat manufacturer to supply him with straw hats of Spanish design, with room to cut holes for the horse's ears. "Women riders like to see hats on their horses," Gibson explained.

CONSTIPATED?

New laxative discovery un-locks bowel blocks without gag, bloot or gripe

Constipation is caused by what doctors call a "thrifty" colon that, instead of retaining moisture as it should, does the opposite: robs the colon of so much moisture that its contents become dehydrated, so dry that they block the bowel; so shrunken that they fail to excite or stimulate the urge to purge that propels waste from your body.

To regain normal regularity, the dry, shrunken, constipating contents of your colon which now block your bowel must be re-moistened. Second, bulk must be brought to your colon to S-T-R-E-T-C-H STIMULATE it to action; to a normal urge to purge.

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