

Dennis the Menace



"...AN' I'LL LEAVE A PLATE O' SANDWICHES ON THE KITCHEN TABLE, 'CAUSE I CAN SEE 'YOU'RE A BIG EATER."

The Medical Roundup

By

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DIVERTICULITIS OF THE COLON

Hardly a day passes that someone doesn't ask me anxiously about the treatment for diverticulitis. A little reading of the person's letter and I find that what he has is the harmless diverticulosis, which perhaps 40 per cent of us men and women have after we are 50. Until a few years ago, no one paid any attention to it. At the Mayo Clinic, where I worked for 25 years, our X-ray men did not bother to report it, any more than they would bother to report that the person had gray hair. I have had diverticula (little pea-sized pouches on the side of my colon) for 40 years; they have never bothered me, and it would never occur to me to change my diet or my way of living because of them.

Unfortunately, in recent years "diverticulitis" has become a fashionable disease. Hundreds of us physicians started diagnosing it; treating it, and even operating for it. Thank goodness, I can see from my huge pile of mail that the fad is beginning to pass. I wonder what will come next.

I can head many people asking, "But why should you doctors always have a 'fashionable disease'?" The answer is that sometimes it is much needed to get a highly neurotic and very fussy woman out of the office quickly, and satisfied. To illustrate: one Saturday noon I spent a whole hour trying to get a young woman who was close to a nervous breakdown to see that all her aches and pains, headaches, indigestion, and diarrhea, were due to her inherited frail body and very fussy and irritable nervous system. Everything annoyed her and caused her to complain. Twice surgeons had operated, and removed her appendix and later an ovary, and still her life was one long misery. Most of this was due to her inability to live sensibly.

As I talked to the woman, I could see I was not getting anywhere; I was only getting her angry with me, but I kept on trying to help, because I felt so sorry for her nice young husband; I so wanted to get him to understand what the basic trouble with her was.

Finally, the woman said

angrily, "But you say that I haven't any sign of a true colitis, and that all of my troubles are due to my constant fussing at everything; why, then did my doctor say that I have colitis?" And I said sadly that obviously he had more sense than I did, because with a little stratagem he had gotten her out of his office in a few minutes, pleased and satisfied; I had spent an hour, and all I had done was to earn her dislike and distrust. I hadn't gotten anywhere. Her next doctor might tell her in 10 minutes that she had a "hiatus hernia" (another fashionable diagnosis). He could operate for it and make her happy for a few weeks.

Dozens of times, my dear friend Dr. H. E. Robertson, the pathologist at the Mayo Clinic, at autopsies would point out to me the perfectly normal lining of the little pouches, and would marvel that they practically never became inflamed. In his enormous experience there was practically no such disease as diverticulitis ("itis" meaning inflammation). Very rarely would he find one pouch that had perforated, and caused an acute and dangerous peritonitis. Patients with the peritonitis often had to be operated on. Dr. Robertson never found any evidence to indicate that cancer starts in one of the little pouches on the colon.

Dr. Alvarez discusses some of the causes of shortness of breath and suggests some helpful ideas in his booklet, "Pulmonary Emphysema." To obtain your copy send 25 cents and a stamped, self-addressed envelope with your request for the booklet to Dr. Walter C. Alvarez, Dept. MMT, Box 967, Des Moines, Iowa 50304.

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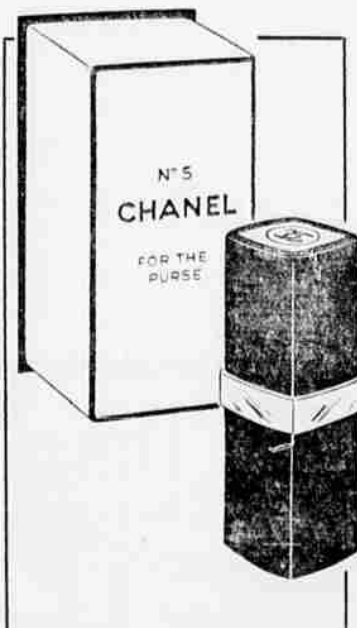
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