



## OH DOCTOR, MY DOCTOR

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*Bill Byrne*

*“Oh doctor, oh doctor, oh dear Doctor John  
Your cod liver oil is so pure and so strong”  
I’m afraid of my life I’ll go down in the soil  
If my wife don’t stop drinking your cod liver oil*

FROM AN OLD IRISH DRINKING SONG.

I haven’t been to a movie theatre in several years. While my taste buds crave that sinful buttered popcorn, why bother since I can watch the latest Hollywood offerings on HBO or HULU comfortably at home? Sit-down restaurants that I can gastronomically tolerate have grown too expensive. I’ve never been much of a gourmand anyway. I leave the pursuit of the Top Chefs to my wife and two sons. Show me the dollar menu or the latest BOGO! So, what does that leave for my social outings these days? Sitting patiently anxious for my name to be called, catching up on the latest magazine fare, and enduring those pharmaceutical advertisements posing as medical news reports on large flat-screen televisions in the waiting areas of one of my doctors examination rooms. No wonder we’re referred to as “patients.”

As a result of all those seemingly endless hours I have spent in my doctors’ company, I’m approaching bionic status. My cardiologist has inserted three stents through my groin and into my blocked heart’s arteries on two hospital stays. My oph-

thalmologist has surgically corrected my cataract problems on two out-patient occasions. My otolaryngologist, after examining my ears, had his audiologist test my hearing responses, show me the percentage of the hearing loss I've experienced, and prescribe two very expensive state-of-the-art hearing aids. My dentist wants me to consider several implants which my insurance won't cover. While I've so far avoided the cancers that have claimed so many, if I can't, I doubt I'll be around long enough to take advantage of the future orbiting hospitals that will slow their growth and treat them. Earth-bound, I'll just have to soldier on.

It's Cicero's opinion that: "In nothing do men more nearly approach the gods than in giving health to men." While some doctors might see themselves in that light, it's also important to remember that they are human beings as well.

Take, for instance, my longest doctor association which stretches back thirty years. Over that time, my internist has gone as gray as my hair has noticeably thinned. He has become what I refer to as my health insurance adjuster, a fate that befalls some doctors who see themselves as mechanics of the human condition. On a typical visit, Doctor C. quickly reviews my latest blood readings, examines the vital signs of the wreck I've become, and recommends new higher dosages of the prescriptions I take. When I once asked him if I could stop taking some of the many he has prescribed, he offered: "Bill, that's what is keeping you alive!" Hard to argue with that logic.

Most of his advice these days is to keep taking the regimen he's ordered for me. He's given up on suggesting that I lose a little weight and exercise more because he knows I will agree and not change what I'm doing. When I told him that my rotator cuff was painful and that I have no trouble going down but have a harder time getting up because of balky knees, he opined that for my complaints my hips may be the culprits. As a result, he gave me a referral slip to see an orthopedic surgeon-friend of his who had helped his wife, one of those doctors who in times past were referred to as "sawbones" for obvious reasons. I have that slip in my desk drawer and

haven't acted on it for fear he may be right. Meanwhile, a little *InstaFlex* supplement helps.

I've been seeing my eye doctor almost as long as my GP. In fact, I've transitioned from father to son over the years. The waiting room is always crowded since most of the patients are accompanied by canes and walkers and designated drivers or care giver assistants. Average age is about seventy five, with double the women to men ratio, we are the "macular degenerates" and "cataract caravan."

Dr W., the son who took over the practice from his dad, has performed thousands of procedures, specializing in cataract affected lens replacement. In prior times, this procedure required a period of inactivity to let the new lenses heal. Nowadays, it's relatively simple, with few precautions. Dr. W. told me that after my procedures, he gave me little lasik adjustments in both eyes, a sort of freebie he gives some of his patients. He also confided in me that he would have rather been a music-major in college, but dad insisted that he study something more useful, such as ophthalmology. Still, when he's not doing eye things, he pursues his musical avocation and is preparing a musical for Broadway with the help of some of his backers.

My cardiologist is a "rock star." I've noticed flashes of his taste in jewelry—rings, ear ring, Tag Heuer watch, gold neck chain. Affectionately known as "Dr. D" around the hospital, everyone speaks glowingly of him and how lucky I am to be under his care. When he's not doctoring, he's traveling abroad to his ancestral home in Italy or deep sea fishing in Venezuela. Thanks to his skill, he tells me my stents and meds are doing their job. I'll drink to that, but only in moderation, Dr. D.!

Dr. Sy, my Eye, Ear, etc. Doctor is the only Romuald I've ever known. He's my rival in age, based on fifty-one years of practicing his specialties, although he won't admit to it. The way he behaves around me, shuffles about, and wears his flaxen hair reminds me of Harpo Marx. I half-expect him to pull out one of those old car horns from his lab coat instead of his otoscope and squeeze a couple of toots at me.

His bedside manner is definitely “old school.” He issues commands—“uncross your legs, sit-up, lean to the right”—and follows the command with physical pushes to make sure you comply. He disagrees with all my opinions, be they medical or otherwise. He doesn’t feel he has to give a reason for his disagreement, just a peremptory “that’s stupid!” A curmudgeon for certain, he still recently told his medical assistant that he liked me. Further, based on his Spartan office and the ancient magazines visible, I’d say he has always been frugal. He commanded me to put cotton wool in my ears to keep water out when I shower and gave me enough to take maybe two until I see him again in six months. I guess the rest is up to me.

My dentist’s office is a far cry from the one room, one chair, one person walk-up I first experienced in Manhattan as a child. Even its name smacks of comfort and chic—“the Dental Spa.” Dr. L. surrounds herself with an equally attractive, competent, and friendly feminine staff. Her four spacious and modern treatment rooms, all designed by her husband, feature the latest in dental technology. And by-the-by, you can get a Botox injection while you’re having your teeth cleaned.

While she works on me, Dr. L. has conversations on such issues as weight management and the latest on Robert Durst with the dental assistant over my reclined head. In the course of a treatment, she hums and muses aloud and to herself on how my procedure is going, interspersed with “Open wide. Close. Rinse” requests. The Spa experience is light years removed from anything I’ve suffered at the hands of any of my former DDSs.

Aside from my medical visits, I frequently walk my precious Irish wolfhound/Border collie mix in and around Clarkston where I live. I keep in contact with my talented, peripatetic, bicoastal musical sons. As for my doctors, I don’t see them as gods. Ministering angels, definitely.