

FROM THE LAND OF THE SICK

*Doctors as patients*

Doctors and the members of their families are not typical patients, and tend to receive special treatment. If they consult a colleague casually, things are more likely to go wrong: the history and examination may be less thorough, the records incomplete, and so on. On the other hand, a colleague's special efforts may also cause unexpected trouble and complications. Established routine procedures are best.

Is an ill doctor still a doctor, or a patient, or both? If he consults no one other than himself, he is both. If he consults a colleague and accepts his or her advice, he is a patient. If he argues with or rejects his colleague's advice, he remains to some extent a doctor. Doctors choose a colleague to look after them to complement the role they prefer as patients. Those who feel they know almost everything and feel they must remain in control, will choose a doctor who will do as they ask. So my father, a very experienced internist, chose as a GP a kind friend whom he had known for many years, but always considered his intellectual inferior. When my father was aged 85 and his GP 82, my father needed a certificate that he was still fit to drive a car. The GP thought it would be a terrible deprivation if he could no longer drive, and so signed it. Soon afterwards my father drove into another car without noticing it, and left the scene of the accident, and after that his licence was taken away.

Those who are ready to trust a competent colleague, who understands them, are content to let him take the responsibility. That's what I prefer, though when it comes to the use of drugs I want my opinion to be respected – and usually followed – because I am a clinical pharmacologist, and it is I who will have to take the drugs. Perhaps I am not so very different from my father.

We all need a good doctor whom we trust, respect and like, who will listen to us but is not too close to us and not in awe of us, and will make his or her own independent judgments. When we find such a friend, we are in good hands.

Andrew Herxheimer