

Outlook on Lifestyle

Do doctors need to know too much?

By Peter H. Gott, M.D.

DR. GOTT

Were I required to pass this year's equivalent of my senior qualifying examinations in medical school — the examinations that I successfully negotiated more than 25 years ago — I doubt I could do it. I am not being facetious. I simply do not have in my head the necessary information to make the grade on the National Boards. In short, I do not know enough.

I am not alone. Many practicing doctors are in the same fix. So are many medical students. The problem of the "indigestible" medical curricu-



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lum — the staggering number of facts, both important and trivial, that must be committed to memory — has reached a critical level of concern. Several editorials in medical journals

have asked: How can today's practicing doctor — or medical student — master all the knowledge that is required, and still continue competently to serve the public?

The pressure to learn is intense. The zeal of faculty members in medical school is extraordinary. The expectation of the public and the threat of malpractice litigation are demanding beyond belief. Some experts believe that these pressures are a major cause of doctors' emotional difficulties, high rate of divorce, substance abuse, "burn-out," professional fatigue and, perhaps, the decreasing ap-

plications to medical schools.

In large part, the problem stems from the fact that there is more to know in medicine than even the brightest and most motivated student can grasp, much less learn. Doctors-in-training are held to the same rigor-

ous standards in basic sciences as are Ph.D. candidates. The medical profession has yet to come to grips with the astonishing growth of biomedical information that has swamped both student and practitioner alike.

Clearly, the answer depends on the willingness of the educational administrators to concentrate, simplify and summarize the enormous body of knowledge taught to students, as suggested by Joseph Alpert, M.D. (University of Massachusetts Medical Center) and Robert Coles, M.D. (Harvard University Medical School). These doctors believe that examinations should require LESS extensive knowledge, LESS minutiae and LESS detailed basic science. Students who are destined to become practicing physicians need a broad-based educational experience; those who choose careers in biomedical research should be offered tailor-made programs more in keeping with their needs. This view, although revolutionary, makes sense. It will require a redesign of medical school curricula.

What about the practicing doctors, then, like yours truly? How can we maintain a suitable level of skill and personal satisfaction in our increasingly demanding environment? Yes, we must keep current with medical advances that affect our patients.

This is an important criterion for competence. However, no doctor can be knowledgeable about the vast array of facts that are currently available. In truth, practitioners have tremendous difficulty staying abreast of advances in just their specialties or in well-defined areas of interest.

William Carlos Williams, the noted poet-physician, once remarked that when it comes to doctoring, "smart isn't necessarily good." For many of us, this statement is a shaft of light, streaming through the crack in the door of impossibility.

Smart helps, but the good doctor learns by experience to single out patients who are really sick from the majority who have less severe illnesses. He learns where to look things up. He develops a referral base made up of specialists from whom he can obtain help. He is not afraid to say: "I don't know." He learns to be kind and to view the patient as a whole, as a person, rather than as a collection of malfunctioning parts. He comes to realize that at least 75 percent of the people he sees will improve on their own if he doesn't make matters worse by poisoning them with medicine or operating inappropriately on them.

It's been said that the good surgeon knows when to operate; the truly good surgeon knows when not to. The good doctor, then, maintains a larger perspective, not merely a micro-molecular view.

Above all else, he recognizes his own limitations. Sometimes understanding this simple concept takes years of practice.

Tips for kids who ride school buses

POLLY'S POINTERS



POLLY FISHER

By Polly Fisher

DEAR POLLY — I'm a school bus driver and I'd like to pass on some tips for children to remember when traveling to or from school on the bus.

Be at the bus stop at least a few minutes before the bus arrives.

Stay at least 10 feet away from the bus until it comes to a complete stop. Get on the bus in a single line without pushing or shoving.

Don't run after the bus if you miss it. The driver can't always see you in the mirror, and a child running close to the bus can get hurt. Go home and tell your parents you missed the bus so they can make other arrangements

to get you to school.

After getting off the bus, don't cross the road until the driver signals that it's safe to cross.

While riding on the bus, sit quietly and face forward at all times. Don't stand, jump around or walk up and down the aisles. If your bus has seat belts, use them.

Keep your hands and head inside the bus. Don't put them out of the window. Don't throw things out the window.

Parents should frequently remind their children of these safety rules, since children can forget easily. — PAM

DEAR PAM — Although it's important to go over these rules with your child when a new school year starts, it is an excellent idea to review bus safety periodically throughout the year. Your helpful pointer earns you the Pointer of the Week award, a copy of my book "Polly's Pointers: 1,081 Helpful Hints for Making Everything Last Longer." Others may order it for \$6.50. Make your check payable to POLLY'S POINTERS and send to

POLLY'S POINTERS, P.O. Box 93563, Cleveland, OH 44101-5663. — POLLY

DEAR POLLY — We're saving on Christmas cards this year, and I'm getting my kindergartener more involved in Christmas preparations — by making potato-print cards. I carve simple Christmas shapes — trees,

stars or maybe a snowman — on half a potato. My 5-year-old dips them in acrylic paints and prints the designs on the heavy construction paper cards we've made. We write a simple "Merry Christmas" on the inside. Our relatives really appreciate getting cards that our family made instead of bought. — CARLA

Polly will send you a Polly Dollar (\$1) if she uses your favorite Pointer, Peeve or Problem in her column. Write POLLY'S POINTERS in care of this newspaper.

Postal workers helping Santa

Canada Post Corporation employees, who last year volunteered to answer close to 800,000 letters Santa Claus received from children across Canada and other parts of the world, are geared up to do it again this year.

As in previous years, every child who writes a letter to Santa, addresses it correctly and includes a return address, will receive a reply from the North Pole.

The program had a modest debut in 1973. That was when a handful of postal employees across the country answered a few thousand letters addressed simply to "Santa Claus" — while several thousands more were addressed to him in care of particular department stores and delivered to those stores.

The Santa Letter Writing Program gained in popularity annually and, due to the ever-increasing number of letters received, became an organized nation-wide project in 1982.

Last year, 8,518 postal employees volunteered their personal time to reply to the nearly 800,000 letters. They were assisted in their letter writing endeavors by senior citizens, and community and professional groups across the country.

The program is also part of Canada Post Corporation's support for improved literacy among children. It promotes correct addressing of letters and the use of the postal code. It enhances the magic of Christmas by ensuring that each child who writes a letter to Santa Claus gets a reply from him.

Letters to Santa should be sent to the following address: Santa Claus, North Pole, Canada, H0H 0H0.

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