

# Doctors owe patients explanations

DR. GOTT



PETER GOTT, M.D.

Dear Marge: You know I'm just a simple housewife. Although I've never had a career outside the family, I've raised my children and made a good home for my husband. I pride myself in having a modicum of horse sense, which is the good sense horses have not to bet on humans. I thought I'd seen it all — until I visited my doctor for a routine checkup last week. I'm sharing the consequences of this visit with you because the experience frightened me, unnecessarily I believe.

On Thursday, I received a report on the blood tests I'd had. After reading it, I was confused and alarmed enough to need some clarification, so I dashed to the telephone and called the doctor. I was told he was "not available for comments" on that day or on Friday. Can you believe it? Not available for comment, after I had spent a whole day and several hundred dollars for the exam. Naturally, Saturday and Sunday were out. The receptionist told me that "perhaps" the doctor would return my-call on Monday, but there was "no guarantee."

I hung up feeling guilty that I had been so presumptuous and selfish as to bother the doctor and his nurse.

I re-read the report. "Your blood sugar is slightly elevated." Slightly? I fantasized that the doctor was trying to break the news gently to me, the news that I have diabetes. I remembered that diabetes leads to blindness and the amputation of one leg, if not both.

I read on. "Here is your authorization for a scan for goiter." Goiter? I didn't know I had a goiter. I felt fine and peppy before the report came. A quick check in the mirror. My neck was certainly not swanlike, but nothing was bulging; my eyes were not popping out. Oh, well — maybe that would happen tomorrow.

Nervously, I studied the report: "You should come back for another blood test after fasting." No mention of how long to fast. Images of Gandhi and starving Ethiopian children passed before my eyes.

"Your cholesterol was 236." Now, Marge, I have a college education and

I know about the Battle of Hastings. I remember quite a bit about American poets. But I did not know the normal value for cholesterol. Let's see ... on a scale of one to 10, 236 must be high. A heart attack is imminent, probably one before heart surgery, one during and several after the operation. Or worse.

I continued. "You have a high HDL." What in the world does HDL stand for? Harvard-Dartmouth-Lafayette? Doctors are always saying that things are too high, especially their insurance premiums. Therefore, high means bad and HDL means Horrible Disintegration of Life. FATAL. Probably a matter of months — no, weeks.

Back to my goiter. "Your blood test showed that your thyroid function was normal but you tested positive for antibodies." Oh, God! That sounded as if the doctor were scolding me. I must not be meant to have any antibodies at all. What are antibodies? Something against the body. Antibodies must mean the presence of infection or a foreign substance, a growth ... a tumor. CANCER.

At this point, I contemplated having a nervous breakdown for the rest of my life. Of course, with all the fatal illnesses I had, I didn't have long to live and this would cut down on the costs. The children would be sad but grateful.

The end. P.S. The average person has a little knowledge, which we all know can be dangerous. But doctors should be willing to take the time to explain things ... and they should watch their language.

Fortunately for me, I eventually called your brother, a doctor, and he answered my questions. But I'll tell you, I was properly frightened for several days. If I hadn't had an explanation, I'd be a basket case. I think I'll change doctors or avoid them altogether. You'd suppose that physicians would be sensitive enough to sit down with patients and take the time to put things in perspective. What good are all the tests if we patients don't know what to make of them? At any rate, I'm better now. Write soon.

Your stepmother,  
Phyllis.  
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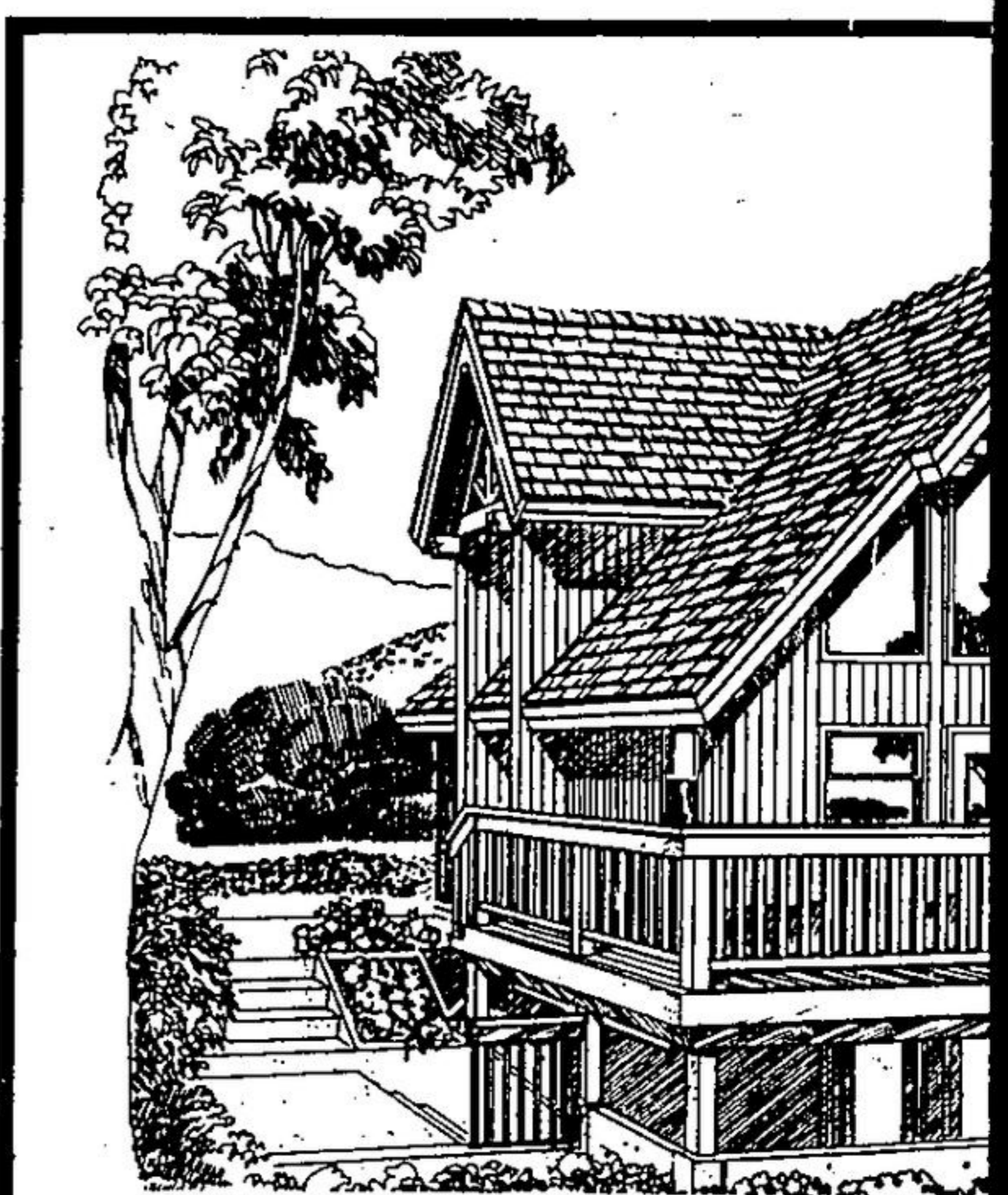
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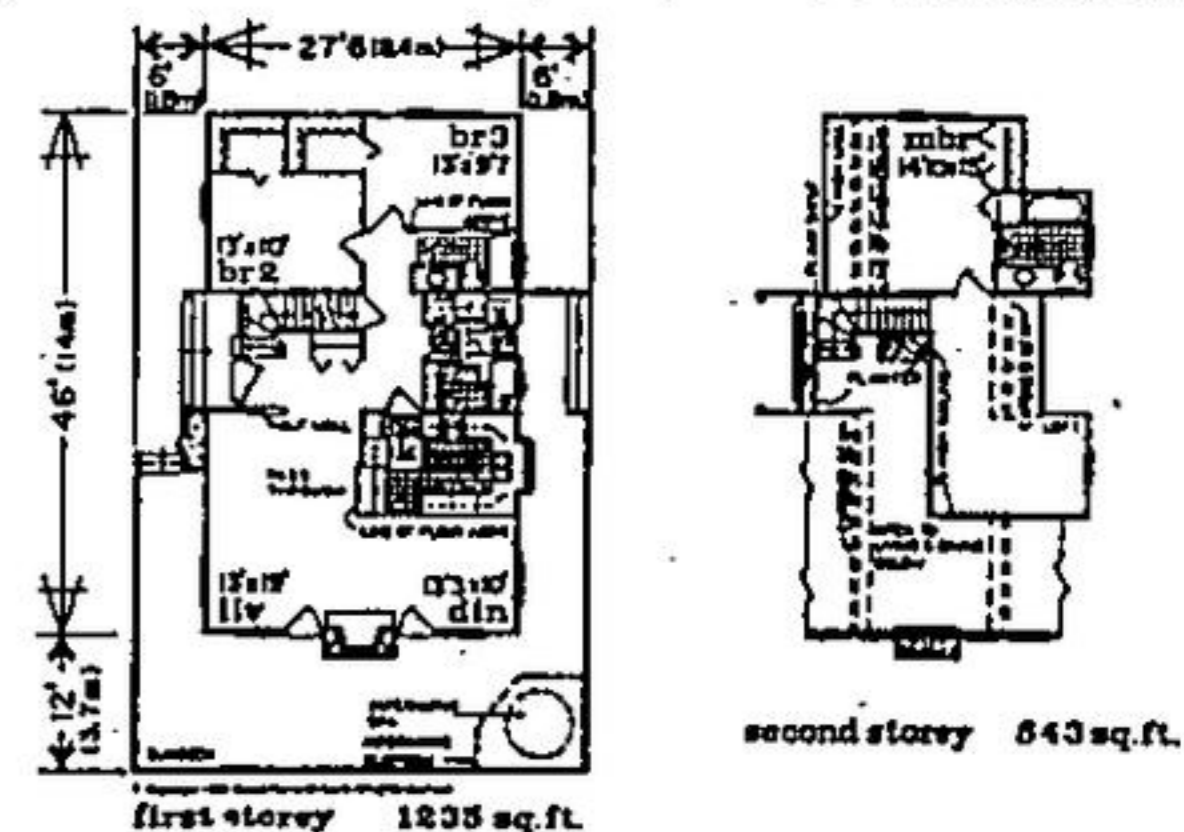
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