

THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

The Doctor Will Laugh With You Now

When Dr. Christopher J. Gallagher was asked to emcee a comedy event at Improv Miami in Coconut Grove, Fla., in 2005, he jumped at the chance. The anesthesiologist said that he tries to incorporate humor in the books that he writes and in his lectures to anesthesia residents and other physicians, but he'd never performed stand-up comedy to a general audience before.

"My take is, you only get one ride on this planet," said Dr. Gallagher, who is now in the department of anesthesiology at Stony Brook University, New York. "It's fun to do different things. When I got the chance to do this, people were saying, 'What if you bomb?' I just thought to myself, 'Not many people get the chance to do stand-up. So why not dare to fail? If I do it and I fail, well, so what?' I just wanted to do something different, something that most people don't do."

While on staff at Jackson Memorial Hospital in Miami, Dr. Gallagher began writing material for an orderly who performed stand-up comedy at local clubs. He



Dr. Christopher J. Gallagher—listening for trouble in the OR—was introduced to comedy by an orderly who performed stand-up.

submitted so much material, the man finally said to Dr. Gallagher, "Why don't you just do this yourself?" That idea had never crossed his mind.

Two weeks before the event at the Improv, Dr. Gallagher was introduced to the no-nonsense manager, who looked him over and said, "Let me guess: you tell funny stories at work?"

"Yeah," Dr. Gallagher replied.

"You think that's going to work here?"

"Yeah."

"Wrong," she replied. "You're going to fail miserably."

She recommended he buy two books on how to do stand-up comedy and practice the drills in them. "This floored me because I always thought [stand-up comedy] was a natural thing, these funny guys that tell funny jokes," Dr. Gallagher said. "She said you have to study what everybody else does. ... I started watching Comedy Central and dutifully did the drills. It was like studying for finals."

He eventually got comfortable with the drills, made a list of jokes, and began memorizing what amounted to about 20 minutes of material: a 15-minute opening monologue plus a few routines between acts. He

grouped the jokes by themes and practiced by "holding a cell phone to my ear and walking around a parking lot," he recalled. "Just memorizing it took a lot of work."

His 11-year-old daughter served as his litmus test for the jokes, "because I wanted them to all be clean," he said. "You can reach beneath the belt [in comedy], and people do it all the time, but I didn't want to do that. I also didn't want to make [the jokes] all medical, because that's almost too easy, 'Oh, here's a doctor. He's doing doctor jokes.' I had Paris Hilton jokes and all different kinds of things."

In one part of his set, he talked about taking his car to get an oil change. "Now, I know nothing about cars, so when the guy asked, 'What kind of oil?' I said, 'Look in the computer. Whatever you gave me last time.'"

Then he asked, '10W40?' I repeated, 'I don't know! Put in whatever you put in most cars!'

He said, '10W30?'

"I said, 'Look, put in a gallon of Crisco, put it in the oven at 450° for an hour, sprinkle it with cheese, and I'll pick it up.'"

Dr. Gallagher is currently penning his eighth book.

Humor plays a role in most of his work, including "Board Stiff Too: Preparing for the Anesthesia Orals" (Boston: Butterworth-Heinemann, 2001); "Board Stiff TEE: Transesophageal Echocardiography" (2004), and "Simulation in

Anesthesia" (2007), which are both also publications of Elsevier.

On the 'Residency' Circuit

Until a few years ago, Dr. Stu Silverstein was giving four to five medical humor talks at medical conventions, staff retreats, and other health care events around the country each month. He started performing stand-up comedy in 1987 during his pediatric residency in San Francisco, a time when he was "going the straight-tie route and getting pretty burned out," he said. "I felt like a big part of me wasn't being expressed. Just doing medicine wasn't really me. There was something missing."

One Sunday, he spotted a newspaper article about Dr. Dean Edell, one of the nation's first media doctors. The article described how Dr. Edell "had been frustrated with medicine, took some time off, and gravitated back to medicine by being a media doctor," Dr. Silverstein recalled. "I said, 'That's interesting. Look at that guy,' because at the time I was considering taking some time off and this was a catalyst."

A few pages later, he spotted an article about a comedy workshop being held at the Holy City Zoo, which was a famous

comedy club in San Francisco at the time. He attended the workshop "and that was it. I was hooked," he said. The workshop director "had us all go on stage to get comfortable with the microphone, and he gave a comedy-writing workshop on the weekends as well."

Before long, he was a regular on the San Francisco comedy club circuit and at other events, serving as an opening act for the likes of the late Pat Paulsen and Tom Kenny, who went on to become the voice of SpongeBob SquarePants. "I would do my residency, come off call, and do sets in comedy clubs," he said. "The challenge was to get an audience to laugh late at night when they were tired."

One night while hosting a showcase event at the Holy City Zoo, Dr. Silverstein introduced Robin Williams, who made a special last-minute appearance. When a fellow comedian told Williams that Dr. Silverstein was a "baby doctor," Williams quipped: "A pediatrician? I guess he plays miniature golf on Wednesdays."

Word about Dr. Silverstein's knack for stand-up comedy began to spread to the medical meetings and convention circuit, and he was booked so frequently that his initial break from residency lasted 4 years. "I was paid more for a single gig than I was for 2 weeks of residency," he said. When he returned to complete his residency, "speaking gigs became my moonlighting."

He finished his residency in 1992 and continued to give medical humor talks after moving to Stamford, Conn., in 1995. However, a few years ago, he cut back on his medical humor talks. "It's a lot of travel and I have small kids," explained Dr. Silverstein, who practices pediatric emergency medicine at Our Lady of Mercy Medical Center in New York. "It became more difficult to do."

He parlayed his sense of humor into a series of books that he has written and edited, including "Laughing Your Way to Passing the Pediatric Boards" and "Surfing Your Way to Pediatric Recertification," which are available at www.passtheboards.com.

He said he can't imagine life without humor as an outlet. "I would be very depressed and dissatisfied," he said. "The diversity keeps me alive."

The 'Healthy Humorist'

Dr. Brad Nieder is so captivated by comedy that he left formal medical practice 5 years ago to pursue it full time. He now practices what he calls "preventive medicine" as the "healthy humorist," giving keynote addresses at medical and health care conferences around the country (www.healthyhumorist.com).

"What I'm doing now is a form of medicine," said the Denver, Colo.-based generalist, who averages about one performance per week. "It's not so much that I gave it up, it's that I found an unusual niche."

Dr. Nieder was a founding member of an improvisational comedy troupe during his undergraduate years at Stanford (Calif.) University, but he didn't do solo stand-up comedy until he started medical school at the University of Colorado, Denver. He



Dr. Brad Nieder left formal practice to pursue 'preventive medicine' via humor.

became a regular on the open mike-night circuit there.

"I became friendly enough with the people at the comedy club who knew that my schedule changed every 4 or 6 weeks depending on what rotation I was on or whether there were tests coming up," Dr. Nieder recalled. "If I called and said, 'Next week looks good for me. Can you get me on?' they were pretty accommodating."

With each year of medical school and subsequent residency training, he grew increasingly concerned that by becoming a physician he would "have less time for the creative stuff that I really liked," he explained. "I could see that [becoming a physician] wasn't going to make me happy. It was an agonizing decision for months: Do I give up this safe path? It was not a very popular decision with family and so forth, yet I decided to go for it."

He keeps up to date on health and medical news by reading articles in the mainstream and professional press. "I read, jot down notes, and every so often I will sit and gather all of those notes I've written and say, 'What's topical?'" he said. "What's funny? That's how I put together the material."

At a meeting of medical coders, Dr. Nieder shared the story of an elderly patient who had come to see him lamenting the aging process. "There are four things you lose as you grow old: You lose your hair, you lose your sex drive, and you lose your ability to do math," the man told him. "Those are the four things that you lose."

Dr. Nieder went on to note that he gave the man "some Rogaine, some Viagra, and a calculator. Now he does your taxes in 10 minutes and his hair sticks straight up for 4 hours."

By Doug Brunk, San Diego Bureau

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