

## Humor in the Medical Literature

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Humor has been published in the medical literature for well over a hundred years.<sup>1</sup> Although a number of authors have addressed the role of humor in medicine,<sup>2-6</sup> little has been written about the type of humor physicians write.<sup>7,8</sup>

Medical humor has appeared in a wide range of journals, from those of international reputation, to specialty journals, to "throwaways." Those areas targeted for humor include medical school and residency training, medical language, academia, writing and publishing, research, and clinical practice. Although the authors have primarily been physicians, medical humor has also been written by nurses, PhDs, and occasionally even by lay people.

While some journals publish humor frequently, others do not. Cartoons, jokes, and anecdotes have appeared most commonly in journals such as *Medical Economics*. Poetry and the bulk of what I call "academic humor" have been published in the major journals. While some humor has appeared in columns such as *JAMA's* "A Piece of My Mind," in many cases, it turns up as mock research studies, in a journal's correspondence section, or even as white-space filler.

*The Journal of Family Practice* has published occasional humor pieces since 1992. Last year, the department Humor in Medicine was created, and I have recently become the editor of that section. I want to take the opportunity now to express my hopes for its future and to review the type of humor that has been published in our journals over the years.

**ANECDOTES:** According to Webster, an anecdote is a short narrative of an interesting, amusing, or biographical incident. The nice thing about anecdotes is that clinical practice is filled with amusing stories. They are also fairly easy to write. Here's one I published a few years ago in *Pediatric Management*:

I recently had a delightful time examining a 3-year-old boy. Although frightened at first, the boy giggled

when I felt pancakes in his tummy and found birds in his ears.

When it came time to do the genital exam, I asked him to pull down his underpants so I could check his penis. He looked puzzled for a minute and then said, "But I don't have any peanuts."

**JOKES:** Although jokes only occasionally make it into print, they are the most common way people express their sense of humor. More than other forms, medical jokes reflect the "gallows humor" that results from the stress inherent in medicine. Here's a joke that was published in an article that explored humor as a coping strategy<sup>9</sup>:

A surgeon, an internist, and a family physician go duck hunting.

The surgeon sees a duck, shouts "Duck!" and shoots it down.

The internist sees a duck, shouts "Duck! Rule out quail! Rule out pheasant!" and shoots it down.

The family physician sees a duck and blasts it out of the sky with a burst of machine-gun fire. As the tattered carcass falls to the ground, he remarks, "I don't know what the hell it was, but I sure got it!"

**CARTOONS:** Cartoons are more challenging than written humor because of the artistic talent they require. Consequently, most medical cartoons are published by nonphysicians. Some are created specifically for a medical audience, while others are reprinted for our enjoyment—see the Risus column in *Medical World News*. Nevertheless, if you can find an illustrator (a medical center is a good place to look), you might be able to collaborate on an idea and still get your nugget of humor published.

**WITTY SAYINGS:** Doctors have been coming up with funny sayings ever since they began handing out prescriptions. I recently had some fun with this topic in an article called, "A CAT Scan a Day Keeps the Lawyers Away."<sup>10</sup> Although most medical quips are anonymous, here are two whose authors are known:

*A man is as old as his arteries.*—Thomas Sydenham

*Statistics will prove anything, even the truth.*

—Lord Moynihan

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Of course, doctors are not the only ones who have something amusing to say about medicine. Here are some famous quotes by non-MDs.

*After two days in the hospital, I took a turn for the nurse.*  
—W.C. Fields

*Either this man is dead or my watch has stopped.*  
—Groucho Marx

**POETRY AND LIMERICKS:** About 10% of the verse published in medical journals is funny. As the following example shows, a poem is an ideal form for the expression of one's medical wit.

To the Editor:

Last year, my husband, a pulmonary fellow, sent me a valentine; he thought that the cardiac system was receiving far too much attention on that day. I thought that your readers would enjoy the valentine.

*A Pulmonologist's Valentine\**

*Roses are red  
Violets are blue  
Without your lungs  
Your blood would be too.*

**CASE REPORTS:** Amusing case reports have appeared in the literature both as full-length articles and as letters to the editor. One of the most famous of these reported the therapeutic effects of chicken soup.<sup>11</sup> Other examples include brief letters that describe strangely entertaining maladies of daily living.<sup>12,13</sup> Although *The New England Journal of Medicine* is well known for publishing this type of material, it appears in other journals as well.<sup>14,15</sup>

**PARODIES AND SPOOFS:** For practical purposes, these terms are synonymous. A parody is a type of humor in which the style of an author or established work is closely imitated for comic effect. Some examples of medical parodies include articles that have spoofed *The New England Journal of Medicine*,<sup>16</sup> *TV Guide*,<sup>17</sup> and *The Yellow Pages*.<sup>18</sup>

**HUMOROUS AND SATIRIC ESSAYS:** Although most medical humor takes the form of amusing essays, it is hard to write good satire. A recent article by Paul Fine is an example of very funny satire.<sup>19</sup> The author hit his target perfectly, but avoided any bitterness and kept the reader smiling as he plowed through all the variations on his initial conceit. Another author who writes terrific satire is Frederick Brancati. Anyone interested in this form should read some of his work.<sup>20-22</sup>

**UNINTENTIONAL HUMOR:** This consists of a wide variety of material, from medical malapropisms ("The patient was admitted with a cerebral conclusion") to funny titles

("Salmonella Excretion in Joy Riding Pigs"<sup>23</sup>), to articles that poke fun at doctors' mediocre writing skills.<sup>24</sup>

**HUMOR IN SERIOUS ARTICLES:** This is an uncommon form of medical humor. When used, it is intended to catch a reader's attention or to emphasize a specific point in an article. Here's a classic example from the introduction to an article on hemorrhoidectomies:<sup>25</sup>

It (the sphincter ani) is like the goalie in hockey—always alert. It apparently can tell whether its owner is alone or with someone, whether standing up or sitting down, whether its owner has his pants on or off. . . . a muscle like that is worth protecting.

**MEDICAL STUDENT HUMOR:** Medical students rarely publish humor. What they produce instead is musical comedy—and lots of it. Every spring medical students across the country sing, joke, and cavort on stage as they put on their annual school follies. It's unfortunate that this material never makes it into print, though I hope this column can reverse that oversight. Here is an excerpt from a song I wrote as a second-year student.

My Favorite Things

(To be sung to the tune of "My Favorite Things"  
from *The Sound of Music*)

Crackles and rhonchi and sibilant wheezes,  
Downgoing toes in a patient who seizes,  
E. multiforme with concentric rings,  
These are a few of my favorite things.

Mitral valve prolapse and EKG squiggles,  
Looking for pulses in babies who wiggle,  
Tapping on tendons that never quite swing,  
These are a few of my favorite things.

Lymph nodes in Hodgkin's and strep pharyngitis,  
Tubes dorsalis and pyelonephritis,  
Palpating livers from winter till spring,  
These are a few of my favorite things.

When the day breaks, when my head aches,  
when I'm feeling sad,  
I simply remember my favorite things, and  
then I don't feel so bad.

I hope the journal's readers enjoy the column and begin to contribute their own humor pieces for review. When considering a topic, remember all of the forms described in this article. An additional resource for examples is the anthology of medical humor that I published a few years ago.<sup>1</sup> We are open to all types of humor, provided the material is well done.

\*From Ott S. *The Pulmonologist's Valentine* [letter]. *N Engl J Med* 1981; 304:739. Used with permission of the *New England Journal of Medicine*.

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