

one interested in the dynamics and future of the healthcare system.

The chapter on information management and how this can be used to reduce medical errors was particularly informative.

The mini case studies, discussion questions and learning objectives in most chapters also enhance the book's readability.

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M O V I E R E V I E W

The Doctor

Theater release date: July 24, 1991; DVD release date: April 6, 2004

A surgeon's job is to cut.
 You've got one chance to go
 in, fix it and get out.

Such is the philosophy of caring for patients as expressed by physician Jack McKee (William Hurt) at the beginning of the 1991 film, "The Doctor." McKee is the type of surgeon who plays "Big Girls Don't Cry" in the operating room, mocks more compassionate colleagues and pontificates on the "danger of becoming too involved with patients." "A surgeon," McKee warns his residents, "must be detached."

McKee notices a "tickle" in his throat that begins to alarm him when he coughs up blood. He goes to see an ear, nose and throat doctor who, after scoping him and examining his throat, declares, "Doctor, you have a growth."

Doctor as patient, doctor diagnosed with cancer, husband with an illness, family dealing with sickness—these and myriad other roles are what McKee will now have to face, deal with and accept. When he tells his wife (Christine Lahti) that he has a laryngeal tumor that needs to be biopsied, her response, "We'll beat it," is met with an icy stare and an angry response. "We don't have it, Ann. It's not a team game." His ability to let his family help him is,

in essence, nonexistent.

When McKee is told by his physician that the tumor is malignant, he indicates that he wants the tumor removed: "I want it cut out." His wishes—partially medically based, partially emotional—are dismissed. "I'm recommending radiation therapy." The modern-day movement for a more open doctor-patient dialogue is nowhere to be found. McKee asks for a lead apron when getting radiation treatment. "The beam is focused on your larynx. You don't need it," he is told. When it's discovered that radiation treatment is not working, he is told by his doctor: "I'll discuss a different treatment with Dr. Abbott." "What about me?" McKee asks "Yeah, sure," is his physician's response.

The issue of patient confidentiality, or lack thereof, is not to be lost on the audience either. Early in the film, McKee and his wife share a laugh listening to the antics of a patient on the speaker phone in their care. McKee's patient is determined to mow the lawn of his home. Patient confidentiality, in McKee's world, is optional. This is nicely contrasted later in the film when a colleague expresses sorrow at hearing that McKee has cancer: "I just heard." "How did you hear? Did they post it in the men's room?"

The film works because it takes a detached surgeon and shows his transformation into a caring human being. The wife and child who were once kept at arm's length are embraced and made an integral part

of the healing process. The new friend who, in the beginning, barely warranted a passing thought is, in the end, instrumental in helping Jack to let others share his pain. And the surgeon who in the initial scenes of the film coldly says to McKee: "Doctor, you have cancer," is substituted with a more empathetic surgeon. Quite simply, in McKee's words, "You don't have the first idea how I'm feeling." The compassion McKee once scoffed at in others is nowhere to be found in his surgeon and that, in the later stages of his disease, is simply unacceptable.

In the end, McKee's philosophies on what it takes to be a good doctor and, ultimately, a good human being, are transformed. "Get in, fix it, get it out. That's what I tell my residents," has been replaced. The end of the film has him having his residents role play as patients for 72 hours, leaving them with this invaluable message:

You have spent a lot of time learning diseases patients may have. Patients have their own names. They feel frightened, vulnerable, sick. They want to get better and because of that they put their lives in our hands.

McKee now knows what being a healer in the purest, most essential form truly means.

Health education value. This film is highly recommended for physicians in the beginning of their

careers as well as for more seasoned doctors. It is an excellent tool to discuss issues of compassion, communicating with patients, confidentiality and interacting with colleagues. Lay people can also learn lessons such as communicating with physicians, knowing and advocating for their rights as patients and overall interactions with the medical system.

Other movies/resources dealing with the doctor as patient and compassion in the medical profession. The film is based on the book, *A Taste of My Own Medicine*, by Ed Rosenbaum. *The New York Times* also has an excellent, ongoing series on the doctor-patient relationship. There are several excellent memoirs dealing with physicians as patients currently in release. Finally, the 2005 film, "Just Like Heaven," starring Reese Witherspoon, may provoke some interesting dialogue on the doctor as patient as well as end-of-life issues.

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*George Dawson, MD
JNMA Art in Medicine Editor*

