

## **Jabs and Jibes: Making Doctors**

**James S. Goodwin, M.D.**

My mother was an undeclared Christian Scientist. She believed, for example, that headaches were self-inflicted, and never had one in her life. Any illness was a bit shameful, a sign of weakness.

My father was more reticent than my mother, but held similar beliefs. He feared hospitals and doctors, and managed to avoid both for most of his long life. A few weeks before he died in his 90s, he was hospitalized briefly for pneumonia. He was miserable; he drifted in and out of delirium; but he maintained his core values of courtesy and good humor. My sister and brothers worked valiantly to protect him from the constant stream of intrusive and patronizing hospital staff. At the end of one particularly rough day, my sister asked him if there was anything she could bring him. "A bushel of apples," he babbled. "Dad, why do you want a bushel of apples?" she asked. "To keep the doctors away!" my father cried.

One might have expected two such mediphobes to spawn a passel of malpractice attorneys. Strangely, two of their five progeny are physicians. My wife is also a physician. Her parents are ranchers; they harbor a deep fear of doctors, who barely rank above bankers in their esteem.

I have been ruminating about this recently, since it became clear that none of our children will be physicians. Most of our friends are physicians. Our conversations at home frequently

involve whatever each of us is currently trying to write about, mostly medical matters. Our children never actually rebelled. They did not criticize or ridicule the practice of medicine. They were polite and respectful as they carefully edged away.

With the first two we were laissez-faire; we supported whatever choices they made. That did not work; they both studied Spanish language and literature; and spent their junior years in Spain. One did not return. She writes long, long letters, that should be published someday. The second is a journalist.

With the third, I took a more directive approach. When he was fifteen I put a human skeleton and a Gray's Anatomy in his bedroom. My wife felt that was a bit overbearing, but for a while it seemed to work. He asked appropriate questions, seemed interested, and, in his first year away at college, enrolled in the physics and math courses required for admission to medical school. It was the summer before second year that he began to slip away. He had difficulty fitting in all the history and literature courses he wanted to take with the biology courses required for the pre-medical curriculum. Suddenly he had an insight; he would do pre-med without biology. This plan expanded to where he is now pursuing pre-med without biology or chemistry. He is happy. He is spending his junior year abroad, in Spain.

Where did we go wrong? How did John Adams, J.S. Bach, and the British Royal Family work it so that their children followed in their footsteps? Why did their children not all want to become Spaniards?

Our fourth child is 14, a long-legged Texas cheerleader. She does not want to be a doctor, and she does not want to talk about it. She wants to be a writer. Come to think of it, her older brothers and sister also aspire to be writers. So do her mother and I, but we also have day jobs.

Perhaps there is a lesson here. Perhaps children do emulate their parents – follow in their footsteps. Perhaps it is the parents who are in error, not recognizing their own footsteps.