

Where have all the young men gone? Gone to doctors — every one

— Bernard Levinson

There is an old medical adage that says – ‘to be a fine physician you should have a bald head and piles. A bald head to look respectable and piles to keep you looking serious ...’ Behind the adage, of course, is the strange provocative thought that a doctor must be mature, oldish, with an air of authority and a sense of having experienced life. He should be older than his patients and certainly not younger than the local bank manager, the schoolmaster or the magistrate.

I remember the doctors of my childhood. They were all very old. (Is that a trick of being young?) They wore overcoats and had gold watches on long gold chains. Oh they were old alright. When I qualified, I clearly remember I had far too much hair and not a sign of haemorrhoids. I settled for a beard.

I keep asking everyone I meet – ‘Would you consult a wise gentle old man who was terribly kind and caring, but had not kept up with today’s discoveries; or a bright young lad fresh out of the safety of his medical school, with no bedside manner to speak of, but the complete state-of-the-art information?’ My friends vote for the old man. I can see by their eyes that they are humouring me. They want to be kind. More and more people are choosing the young man. “OK”, I say. “Then how about this – how about that same old man and a young woman doctor?” The answer is the same. Everything changes.

The cinema knows. They accurately mirror all the changes in fashion, style and mores. We have relentlessly moved away from the Lionel Barrymore presentation of the wise old doctor to the brash debonair

brilliant diagnostician of the new image Dr Kildare. The current medical soapies have an army of young men wearing denims and sneakers. The patient is rushed into the trauma unit and all the young men, who a moment before looked for all the world like patients in the drug-abuse program, rush forward. They all wear stethoscopes draped length-wise around their necks. They read electrocardiograms like the morning news. There is no lack of authority or respect.

And women too. Again the cinema has sensed the brave new world of feminism. Take the murder mystery. I grew up safe in the suave hands of Sherlock Holmes. I didn’t mind shifting to the equally charming but far more violent James Bond. I even took the sexually aggressive Mike Hammer in my stride because this was a man’s world and the baddies are also men. Then women appeared. She was a pathologist or a lawyer – somehow they worked as a team. She knew karate and could drive a car in the inevitable car chase. In a recent film (*The Silence of the Lambs*) a young attractive female rookie in police college, is sent out to do all the amazingly aggressive things men used to do. The feminists have won.

The young are there already in politics. John Kennedy set the stage for the youthful athletic leader. It has become ridiculous in sport. The gymnasts are practically burnt out in their twenties. Tennis threatens to have adolescent or at most young adults in their number one slot. Bowls, that traditionally leisured game for retired gentlemen has long been dominated by younger men. LA Law, that soapie legal television

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series introduces us to the tough young legal minds in their smart suits and fast cars. A far cry from the Dickensian doddering wisdom of the old experienced English barrister.

It's a new world. And medicine is right there in the forefront of this new wave of coping youth. Are there any advantages in such a young take-over?

I can see the young doctor being far more business minded than their older colleagues ever were. When I started general practice on my own, in a small seaside resort, the plumber next door taught me to keep accounts. He had a far better grasp than I, of the intricacies of conducting a business. He wasn't ashamed or reticent in talking about fees. It was I, locked in an unreal medical world that allowed me to believe this was not a business but a 'calling'. The exchange of money took place peripherally between my receptionist and the patient. I kept myself totally aloof. Today's young medics will have thankfully shed that quixotic attitude. They are doing a skilled job. They know what they are worth. They are not ashamed to ask for it.

The new doctor will play a far more assertive role in the community. Older colleagues were too dignified and reserved to appear in the marketplace and make demands. Already medical aids are facing a younger politically minded physician who is unafraid to negotiate, to make and to demand a fair reward for honest work.

We were far too committed to our allopathic system of medicine. This is what our 'fathers' taught us. It was sacrosanct. Advances were understood only within the context

of our appreciation and practice of allopathic medicine. We were cautious and endlessly conservative. Young doctors are unafraid to be wholistic in their practice. They are free to use, and indeed understand insights in all the older systems of medicine. Our patients, perhaps tired of a mechanistic impersonal investigation that only asks where and how - are turning to this new breed of people who are at last asking why. Why is this happening to you? And how can we change your life style? I spent a great deal of time percussing chests - touching - feeling - even sniffing my way through a physical examination. I like to think that the young wholistic practitioner is listening more.

A comment on a recent BBC interview with an Israeli air force general spelt out the central issue. He was asked why the Israeli pilots were better than the Arabs considering they were essentially flying the same aircraft. The reply reverberated inside me. 'To fly such a fighting computer, you have to be a contemporary person ...'

To practice medicine today you have to be a contemporary person. Whether we like it or not, we are in the bio-pharmacophysiological lab-report business. Radiography produces pictures that make Gray's Anatomy look simple. Psychopharmacology already manipulates the brain like a unique chemical scalpel and not the sledgehammer tranquilisation of my generation.

I will repair to my favourite pharmacist and drink coffee with him at the back of the shop. Of course, we no longer have the work-area privacy

of the old days. The smells of sulphur and malt have vanished. But he is of my generation. We talk about A P Dovers and Mist Pot Stim. We both remember the detailed scripts I wrote out, detailing all the ingredients I wanted him to mix.

"Now come on", I frequently ask. "Wasn't that better than counting pills?" "No", he says.

But I know he really doesn't understand. He has lost all the magic he ever had. And so have I.