

A Healthy Soul in a Healthy Body

by Fred Stenson



I suppose it was back when the First World War killed God and rendered formal religion obsolete. That was when the medical doctor replaced the minister/priest as the most important person in town. I remember because it was still true in 1950s Alberta when I was growing up. At the local clinic, when ushered into the presence of the doctor, you kept your eyes down, your hands folded, your lip buttoned. You asked to be forgiven for your contusion or illness and the doctor graciously did forgive you, sometimes after a lengthy scolding. At the end of an appointment, the doctor didn't bless you, but conferred something rather like a blessing: a last-minute lightening of the mood, perhaps saying to your mother or father, "I think what this young chap needs is an ice cream." And my parents, who did not go in much for buying ice cream, would buy me one, because it was an order. And I, though almost cer-

tainly lactose intolerant and made sick by ice cream, would do my best to eat it.

But then along came the guaranteed health insurance scheme, Medicare, pioneered in Saskatchewan in a battle that divided

communities (a battle portrayed very well in the recent novel *Swimming into Darkness* by Gail Helgason of Edmonton). For some reason, the doctor-as-priest sustained a direct hit to the solar plexus on the day medical insurance was conferred on all, and has never recovered. Why that is remains a question (or many questions) well worth pondering.

It seems to have a lot to do with money and how it is earned by doctors and paid to them. Why, for example, do we resent the income of doctors more today than when we paid them directly? Why do doctors go ballistic when they ask for more money and the Province pleads poor? In the old days, when the

individual patient pled poor, the response was compassion. Why is the notion of a doctor billing the government so much per patient visit, per gall bladder, per vasectomy, so embarrassing to doctors and patients both, when the same method of billing at a service station doesn't make us blush in the least? Why do Albertans assume the doctor visit they are not paying for costs \$200 when in fact it costs about \$30? Why does the payment per service method of squaring the medical books make us assume that doctors will now whip out your gall bladder for no reason whatsoever, perhaps rendering you sterile while they're at it? That is, why didn't we suspect this when we were paying for it ourselves? And why does the system actually corrupt the odd doctor into becoming scalpel happy? Why, under the old scheme, did doctors like country life and seek it out, when now, under the provincial scheme, they regard it as a horrible punishment? Finally, why does everything cost 10 times as much the minute the government runs it?

Can I answer these questions? Not on your life. But I can observe that the decline in respect for doctors somewhat resembles the decline in respect for clergy that happened after the First World War. I can observe that, on the great cosmic teeter-totter, the decline of respect for doctors is happening at the same time as respect for formal religion and clergy is again on the rise. Witness last summer when the Pope, JP II, came to Toronto for the World Youth Day celebrations. Wherever the ailing pontiff went, there was a river of tears over his wisdom and his courage. Suddenly the idea of a wise old man, stooped and weak, giving the world advice didn't seem corny. It was very appealing.

What I find myself wondering is whether the two institutions, religion and medicine, so prone to reversals of fortune, one always

seeming to wax as the other wanes, shouldn't consider amalgamation. Wouldn't the opposing trend lines of their popularity, if combined, produce something like stability and peace?

Now, before you toss this out as lunacy, consider the value of having the Pope assume an additional title such as Surgeon Universal. The question of whether eating a chicken egg is beneficial or suicidal could be fully and finally resolved in an instant. The Pope could simply rule on it infallibly. The end.

Consider the patient visit. Doctors very often hear confessions in response to seemingly innocuous questions. "How *did* you wrench your back?" "Why *does* a married man suddenly need an HIV test?" It seems merely efficient that the doctor be given the power to grant absolution in addition to the power to grant prescription.

Then there's the doctor's lowest moment, bad prognosis, when there just doesn't seem to be a truly helpful word to offer. Consider how this will be eased by an extension of franchise into the afterlife. "Your life, though almost over, John, is, in another sense, just beginning."

Meanwhile, clergy, who often complain of being underpaid, could see their incomes increase through adoption of the government fee-for-service approach. Baptism? Twenty bucks. Marriage? Hundred bucks. Mass? Five bucks per head at the door. Confession? Buck a sin. Should any clergy defraud the system by saying too many masses or forgiving too many sins, the College of Metaphysicians and Surgeons steps in and brings them back into line.

As there is a person-power shortage in both medicine and religion, it seems to be simple arithmetic that the number of bodies will go further when the professions are combined. It will also be easier to make up a foursome on the golf course.

It will be interesting to see how

the mouth is dealt with. It could go either way. The connection between the mouth and the body could be admitted, as it currently is in religion, or it could be denied, as it currently is in medicine. If the combined system were to opt for medicine's approach, sins of the mouth would no longer be addressed by mainstream clergy. They would be handed on to private practitioners who absolve the sins for an unregulated fee, whatever the market will bear. Then there will be an elaborate preventive system, checking the mouth for sins every few months. Ching, ching.

I admit not everything will be simple. In the area of sexual misconduct, it's hard to see how amalgamation of religion and medicine will solve the very similar problems experienced in both. There will, however, be economies of scale when the treatment facilities for offenders are put together. "Abuse of Power" group therapy workshops can be melded without amendment. Likely, parents who would never dream of sending their child to the doctor alone will retain that principle when the doctor is now the minister, and this too will be a good thing. If, under amalgamation, women are given equal rights, if celibacy as virtue finally bites the dust, then perhaps the problem will be solved after all.

I suspect that not everybody is going to agree with this approach. But clearly something must be done. The current regime where doctors and citizens regard each other with suspicion over the chasm of the body—well, it's not healthy, is it. Call me old fashioned, call me a victim of paternalism, but I really would prefer to trust, respect, and even like, the persons who assess the ability of my body to pump blood, the folks who don latex gloves in my direction.

Fred Stenson's new book, *Thing Feigned or Imagined*, has just been released.