

Virus kills primary care donkey

The sultan decided he wanted to reform the health care system. He said he would do this by having his donkey become a primary care doctor. The donkey would then be able to treat his subjects inexpensively in the imperial stable. So they found an instructor who, when brought before his sublime majesty, said he could teach the donkey primary care in 12 years. He had taught other donkeys in 20 years, he claimed, but this one was exceptionally gifted. He would, however, need a large grant of gold coins, because the donkey would learn faster if he was put in pleasant surroundings so he would feel more human. All this is recorded in the *Journal of Primary Care of the Arabian Nights*.

The sultan agreed, but said he would cut off the instructor's head if the donkey failed to graduate. The instructor took the money, bought himself a beautiful house, and put the donkey in the stable. His wife was terrified about the whole thing, but the instructor told her not to worry: in 12 years many things could change: he could die; the sultan could die; or the donkey could die. "Relax," he said, "and enjoy our good fortune." When

the sultan's men found the donkey in the stable, he explained to the sultan's satisfaction that he put him there only temporarily to punish him for not learning fast enough.

Years went by. The instructor and his wife enjoyed their new lifestyle. The sultan was pleased to hear the donkey would soon do primary care. He said he would also have a goat deliver babies in the other imperial stable and have a camel offer psychiatric services in the nearby desert. He renewed the gold coin grants ungrudgingly, and the instructor's wife stopped worrying. All was going well and the sultan's approval ratings went up.

Then some time in the eleventh year disaster struck. The donkey became forgetful and developed a persistent cough. He seemed to have caught a virus, but nobody could tell if it was the asinine flu or merely a retrovirus. Then the donkey died. The sultan was heartbroken. So was the instructor. He even offered to give back the sultan his gold coins—that is, the ones that were left. The sultan was indignant and said he would cut his head off. The instructor kept his coins.

Many more years went by. Some say the donkey never died but prescribed the wrong medicine and then bit the sultan, who smothered under a bale of hay and died. Some believe it was the instructor who died, killed by giant rays from his cellular telephone, and that it was Scheherezade

who put the donkey into primary care; but others say that the instructor is still alive and now chairs a task force on reforming donkey education and may soon become a minister of health.

Some people believe that the details of the case are as recorded in the journal; others that they are not. Viral studies are in progress to determine what killed the donkey, but many of the specimens have been lost.—GEORGE DUNEA, attending physician, Cook County Hospital, Chicago, USA

