



Most large American cities have a free weekly newspaper that presumably derives what income it has from advertisements. Such newspapers are usually published on the Dickensian principle that the more words the better. Hence the article "Why are doctors

such jerks?"—particularly galling at the end of a long day spent with difficult patients—goes on for 11 pages, interspersed with ads for futons, better savings accounts, new furniture, ottoman recliners and chairs for ailing backs, leather love seats, jewels, kilims, and lessons how to dive, to slim, or to exercise.

"Everybody has a story," writes the author of this article, explaining that the phenomenon of "jerkiness" has multifaceted manifestations. Doctors are arrogant, insensitive, always late, insulting, and even dishonest, and they never stop to listen to

their patients. Surgeons apparently are the worst offenders, but other specialists don't come off scot free either—such as the gynaecologist who left a dignified elderly woman unclothed in a draughty examining room for 45 minutes, then drifted in and out without bothering to answer any of her questions. Then there was the foreign doctor who hardly spoke any English but giggled all the way through a delicate endoscopic procedure, the surgeon who removed a woman's coccyx unnecessarily, the one who sent a \$14 000 bill to a poor widow even though he had promised that he would not charge her, the ones who scream at their secretaries and at the laboratory staff.

Better selection of applicants to medical school and training in communication by using patient surrogates are some of the perennial stock remedies suggested to help with the problem of bossy doctors who bully patients, announce what tests they will have or mention offhand that they have cancer and need an operation, and then promptly move on to the next patient. Then there is the complaint that doctors spend more time with the x-rays and lab reports than with the patients, they never call back, make inappropriate sexist remarks, are in medicine

only for the money, and never listen, never listen, never listen.

But in defence of doctors we also read that they often work in a poorly organised system that is impossible to penetrate or make work. They are subject to many pressures—review bodies, utilisation, cost cutting, unrealistic expectations, a demanding population. Interns often still undergo a gruelling initiation of long hours on call and never ending scut work. And from a practising paediatrician we hear that he tries to be the nicest person in the world but sometimes cannot help losing his temper when, after dealing for 48 hours in a row with fevers and diarrhoeas, he gets a call at 1 am for a diaper rash.

Such bad temper, according to the ads, should respond to the only new album of the Beatles published since 1976. To buying a new kind of exercise machine for 15% off—while the stock lasts. To choosing the bicycle best suited to you for anywhere between \$310 and \$600. To buying a very functional halogen lamp for only \$49. Or to reading about a "pronounced talent for abstraction in relation to both aural and visual space" in a film review as long as the *Mystery of Edwin Drood*. —FORCE DUNE, attending physician, Cook County Hospital, Chicago, USA