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In praise of disagreeable news

As I write this 200th Letter from Chicago/Soundings I find the business no easier than it was 20 years ago. Like the archbishop who was successful in this world but unsure about the next, I am constantly assailed by doubts. Is the writing too plain, too pretentious, too long, too smarty, or just plain boring? Am I writing too much about bad deeds and not enough about good ones?

Of course it should be the other way round. But then don't the newspapers also thrive mostly by reporting disasters and foul deeds? A boy scout taking a blind woman across the street is hardly news, unless perhaps she did not want to cross over in the first place.

Indeed if people did mostly evil the occasional good deed would be more newsworthy. But most people basically behave well. Perhaps this is only because, as Nietzsche suggested, they fear the police more than they love their neighbor-but we'll let that pass. At any rate in medicine most doctors work long hours, have trained long and hard, care about their patients, and put up with a lot from pompous bureaucrats, truculent lawyers, disgruntled patients, and neglected wives. Likewise, most patients are frightened, often in pain, and only too ready to trust their doctors with their lives. Even administrators would do the right thing, if only they knew how.

Because of all this there is no advantage in writing about the doctor who worked all night to save a desperately ill patient and then topped it off by not even sending a bill. The nurse who devotes the best years of her life to caring for crippled children or patients with spinal cord injuries deserves a place in Butler's Lives of the Saints, as does the widow who works two jobs to raise three children, including one severely mentally and physically retarded. Yet neither will make headlines. But think of the surgeon who came drunk to the operating room and amputated the wrong leg. Or of the physician who prescribed gentamicin in a dose that would kill a large African elephant. Or of the doctor who sent Medicare one bill for giving an old lady an injection of liver and iron and another for repairing the hole in her roof. Or of the nurse who eloped to the South Seas with the chief endocrinologist and then underwent a sex change. Or of the hospital administrator who dislocated his shoulder pushing a pile of paper across his desk and then drowned in a well of red ink.

I once knew a woman who drove her indigent patients to the hospital in her own car and then would pay for their medications out of her own pocket. But wouldn't most people rather read about the gynecologist who used his own sperm to inseminate dozens of women suffering from sterility? Or about the woman lawyer who counseled another woman and represented her in a divorce while at the same time having an affair with her husband? Or about the male lawyer who had an affair with a client and billed her for all the time they spent together? Or would they rather read about the doctor who practiced until the age of 82, would often fall asleep in his consulting rooms, and then one day failed to wake up while taking a patient's history?