



A friend recently told the story how years ago the pilgrims visiting a shrine in the Middle East also had the opportunity of consulting an outstanding physician. His fame was largely due to his potent remedies, which included an intramuscular injection of vitamin C that made one limp for the next week. He had too an impressive x ray machine, something practically unknown in that area at that time. Sadly, however, this consisted of an old refrigerator on which he had piled a stack of used x ray films that he would pull down to show the patient as he emerged from the supposed x ray machine.

Yet I imagine that most of the patients (at least the estimated 80% with self limiting ailments who visit a doctor's office) felt much better after seeing the famous man—

that is, after the pain in their hinder part let off, and provided the temperature in the ice box was kept within acceptable limits. Health planners might indeed note that a pretend x ray costs less than a real one, and that a phial of ascorbic acid is cheaper than the diagnostic barrage that a parallel visit in much of the developed world might engender. This without even counting the universally prescribed calcium channel blockers such as *cardiasomething*, for which the main indication seems to be the presence of a heart.

Rare indeed is the dinner party at which nobody is taking such a drug, and often these people are asymptomatic and normotensive, such as the old gentleman still taking *cardiasomething* at two dollars a tablet three years after an ill defined episode of dizziness. Perhaps he would have been better off in the refrigerator.

I met another one of these *cardiacaters* on an aeroplane a few weeks ago. He was a chatty man who gave me his whole history before I could get a word in. He said he was under the care of a chiropractor who had diagnosed his podagra by merely hooking

him up for 20 minutes to an electric machine, even without asking questions, taking blood, or having him take his boots off. His gout was then cured by a nutritionist who grew his own herbs and extracted his remedies from them. Better than allopurinol, which had never been tried, the tinctures had worked well, except on that unfortunate day (and I swear this is the truth) when he had mistakenly been prescribed the extract for the right foot for an attack affecting the left.

Now my friend also tells the story—perhaps apocryphal?—of two doctors from the same school practising in the same square. One had been at the bottom of the class but now had an immense practice. The other had won all the prizes but was now starving, so he swallowed his pride and went to ask for the secret. His opulent colleague took him to the top of the minaret and asked him to look down and tell him how many wise men he thought could be found in that crowded square. "Two," said the other. "I then," he replied, "those are the two who consult you, the others come to see me"—
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