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The judge makes hospital rounds

It is 9 am and the doctors in starched white coats are waiting in the lobby for the judge to make his ward rounds at the hospital. The judge arrives and parks his big Mercedes in his reserved place. He then puts on his sterile wig and a disposable black robe. The doctors all stand up.

"Good morning, your honor," say the doctors.

"Good morning, boys," replies the judge. "What do you have for me today?"

"There is a 23 year old woman with a failing placenta, sir. We believe that if the baby is not delivered at once it will die or become mentally retarded. The mother refuses to have a caesarean section, saying she trusts in God to give her a normal baby."

The judge lays aside his gavel, puts on gloves and examines the woman.

"It's a difficult case," he says gravely. "I think I'll get a second opinion. What else do you have?"

"There is a neuro case for you, sir. An 80 year old woman, very depressed, mentally incompetent, needs ECT, but we need your permission, sir."

The chief, old and grey, speaks hesitantly and at times inaudibly. He is clearly uncomfortable and treats the judge with great deference.

"Make it quick, please," says the judge, "I have a special dinner to go to. One of our better juries has just given \$42 million to 11 women who got diethylstilbestrol during pregnancy. It's a great victory for the law and I must offer my congratulations. Then I am off to the Food and Drug Administration. They have just finished this messy business of labeling food products and now we must stop these other fellows from saying that their dietary supplements and vitamins cure colds, cancer, hair loss, and even senility."

He examines the old woman, eliciting the plantar reflexes with the handle of his gavel.

"Babinski, you know. Worked with Charcot - who by the way turns out not to have been a bad chap after all. Did you read the *BMJ* Christmas issue?"

"No, your honor," says the chief, "too busy reviewing the charts for a malpractice case."

"Hmm," mutters the judge. They go to the autopsy room. Woman died of metastatic breast cancer. The insurance company refused to pay for a marrow transplant - said it was experimental.

"Despicable," says the judge. "I'll take this to one of my juries."

Two weeks later the judge returned. By then four courts had ruled that the woman with the placental insufficiency could not be forced to have a caesarean section. She moreover delivered a five pound normal baby anyway. Another court then ruled that they couldn't give ECT to the mentally incompetent woman with the depression. A jury made national headlines by awarding \$89 million to the survivors of the woman who was denied a marrow transplant. In the same week the newspapers published the results of a study showing that it was cheaper for the government to pay regular fees for Medicare patients rather than enroll them in health maintenance organizations.

"But doesn't that fly in the face of managed care and cost containment?" piped up a junior houseman.

"Nonsense," said the judge. "They have plenty of money. Didn't you see the big Christmas tree in the White House this year? I'll speak to one of my juries. They'll make 'em pay!"