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Young doctors, old lawyers

When it comes to choosing a doctor, or for that matter a lawyer, age is clearly one of the determining factors. An old saying on this subject, "old lawyers and young doctors," would suggest that doctors should be young, enthusiastic, brimming with energy, but that lawyers are at their best when they are older, more seasoned, and more experienced.

Anthony Trollope addresses this subject (from the perspective of choosing a lawyer) in one of his lesser known novels, *Orley Farm*. There he contrasts a naive young lawyer who returns from an academic meeting persuaded that the role of lawyers is to discover the truth, with one more experienced who has no time for newfangled ideas, insists that a lawyer's first duty is to his client, and wins a case even though the defendant later turns out to have been guilty.

For the healing professions, however, there is another saying: "Seek old physicians but young barbers." It presumably dates from the days when the barbers and surgeons were part of the same cutting profession, and suggests that surgeons (and barbers) deteriorate with age (or at least their hands become less steady), but that physicians improve.

Notwithstanding these arguments, a *Wall Street Journal* writer has opted for youth. In "How to pick a doctor" (11 November 2002) he recommended choosing a doctor just out of training, one who would have recently seen many sick patients and been exposed to the latest science, and who would also be more likely to remember you, "since you aren't the millionth patient in his [or her] career." He would have more energy than a veteran, and would be more easily available because he is just beginning to build a practice.

The writer further advises picking a doctor who also does some teaching, and finding out where he went to school, where he served his residency, and what are his views on certain controversial medical issues. The informed consumer should ask if he can see him today if he gets ill, if his office runs on time, and, in these days of instant communication, whether he can communicate with him by email.

But for the many deprived of the luxury of a choice, and for the few with an unambiguous preference for youth, the alternative is to wait in a teaching hospital outpatient clinic and have their history taken by a young medical student.