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Words ... Medicine or Poison

Catholic Physicians' Guilds
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As the anesthetic takes over for major surgery, the patient is thrown into panic. Why? Because an operating room nurse is softly singing, "Nearer My God to Thee." A Texas physician, Dr. Charles H. Gillespie, tells of other thoughtless words of health personnel—words which stab at the patience of patients, a surprising number of whom hear every utterance while supposedly under general anesthesia:

"I'm going to shoot him now." (Loading the needle in a rifle?)

"Hook up the monitor." (Or did he say "monster")

"A spinal puncture is indicated." (There goes my life sizzling away.)

"This just isn't my day." (Has he shattered the blood bottle? Cut in the wrong place? Stopped my air supply?)

Dr. Gillespie, hurt patients by failing to watch their language. "If you cannot be reassuring, quiet," he advises his colleagues, "be quiet.

When are words better swallowed than injected—or will verbal salve be preferred dosage form? Is there an antidote for spoken poison, a medicine to heal wounds from cutting remarks, a serum against contagious commotions? The questions point up an often-overlooked aspect of medical practice—the "pharmacology" of speech. Patients in real or imagined crisis are inclined to cling to expressions from those in the healing arts more than from almost anyone else.

"The same prescription given by two different physicians helps with one and fails with the other," speech clinic director Paul J. Moses, M.D., reminded a medical audience in San Francisco last fall. "One's suggestive voice makes it work, while the other physician's voice might have a touch of doubt and the medicine fails."

Even the way a prescription is written could determine therapeutic outcome. Thomas T. Jones, M.D., of Durham, N.C., insists that all too many physicians use negative language. He suggests, for example, that "One at mealtime for indigestion" could be more effective if written: "One at mealtime to improve digestion."

While unmeasured words may take the erratic flight of birds, wordless might be injurious, too. How many times has a physician's shrug led a patient to believe that a serious but manageable ailment is hopeless, triggering a harmful physiological reaction? If words are birds, shrugs can be drugs—drugs applied carelessly.

A curious illustration of the body's response to verbal stimuli was shown at the University of Minnesota not long ago. There, psychologists devised a "laugh index" for students viewing a slapstick film sequence. They found that volunteers given epinephrine before the movie laughed louder and longer than did the other students. Epinephrine is a natural secretion of persons experiencing fear. This study...
The Population Increase and Biologic Organization

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For some years there has been a disquieting trend toward emphasis of laboratory and experimental research at the expense of clinical and practical medicine. Many students and young physicians with scientific ambitions but few qualifications for research would better serve their chosen profession by engaging in practical medicine. The need for them is urgent.

One reason for the ever-increasing demand for doctors throughout the world is the rapid increase in population. The present world population is about three billion; according to calculations by United Nations scientists, by the end of this century the figure will approach six billion unless unforeseen events should slow the growth process. The grave implications of this unprecedented population increase are self-evident; they are of a nutritional, racial, political, economic and, most important, humanitarian nature. Nevertheless, it has been and will remain the physician's task to preserve the health of the individual, including the feeble and the unfit, and thus to prolong the life span, even though in so doing he is contributing to the threatening increase of mankind. The medical profession has certain inflexible laws, and its object is to maintain the human body as a force whose influence upon the human body can be as great as that of the most potent drugs.

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