

Club Meds

One of the first duties of a physician is to educate the masses not to take medicine.

— WILLIAM OSLER (1848-1919)



orry Doc, but the first duty of the masses is to seek solace, health, euphoria, and recreation in as much medicine as they can get their hands on.

When Sir William Osler, the best-known physician in the English-speaking world at the turn of the century, died in 1919, the average family's medicine cabinet contained little more than aspirin, mustard plasters, and Lydia Pinkham's "Pink Pills for Pale People." Today, those people are, with the exception of myself, busy taking advantage of their pre-paid Eternal Rest contracts. Obviously, we needed more medications and the pharmaceutical industry has not failed to deliver after due deliberation by the Federal Drug Administration (Motto: We'll Think About It).

Confronted with today's 40-pound issue of the *Physicians' Desk Reference* and its detailed description of every pill, capsule, extract, and elixir known to mankind, Sir William would have plotzed. His advice to physicians to educate the masses not to take medicine, if taken literally, would have plunged the nation into economic chaos.

Take the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, which spent \$515 billion in 2005 — that's 21 percent of the federal budget and about \$21 billion more than all defense spending. These figures are Mark McClellan's, Medicare/Medicaid chief, whose resignation became effective in October. When the federal government spends \$515 billion, somebody is receiving the same

Continued on Page 1009

UPON HAVING A NASTY ENCOUNTER WITH AN ICE BERGLET, THE ELDERLY PASSENGERS OF THE QEZ ARE REQUESTED TO TOSS ALL MEDS OVERBOARD TO LIGHTEN THE LOAD.



C FAST FORWARD TO THE NEXT DAY:



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Continued from Page 1010

amount. Not you and me, of course, but obviously there is big money in sickness. A nation of well people would be disastrous to our economic wellness. Get lost General Motors — as Merck et al. goes, so goes the country.

The moment you start receiving those comical “Over-the-Hill” birthday cards with the black border, you are but moments away from the strangely satisfying Saturday night ritual of restocking the little seven-day compartmented boxes with your “meds” for the coming week. As an octogenarian who has been over more hills than Lewis and Clark, may I suggest that peer-group discussions of one’s meds is right up there with the equally fascinating comparisons of ailments the medicines are intended to alleviate.

Lining up the assorted bottles filled with the variously colored, multishaped tablets and capsules in front of me, I am self-righteous as a new nonsmoker. Plink, plink, plink go the meds as they drop into their Sunday-through-Saturday compartments. Several of them are prescription drugs, the rest assorted vitamins and minerals. All are washed down with blind faith, tainted slightly by the realization that, unless I am addicted to a mashed potato-gravy diet, the vitamins are probably a waste of money. The glucosamine/chondroitin tablet is roughly the size of a medication administered by veterinarians to ailing horses. It has resulted in no appreciable increase in my ability to climb and descend stairs or gallop a couple of furlongs even though I have sluiced down enough tablets to

sink the QE2. Which, by the way, has a shipboard population weighted heavily in the mature age category, i.e., those with the platinum plastic to satisfy the fare. Should the ship ever be in danger of sinking, deep-sixing the old folks’ medications would be the first act in saving the vessel.

But we have faith, we older citizens, along with our fond memories of Glenn Miller and paid-for automobiles. The pharmaceutical industry has never let us down except in a few cases settled out of court, or where litigation is pending and the autopsies are inconclusive. Should their R&D division come up with a cure for which there is yet no known disease, count us in to take it. Nothing is more reassuring to a veteran pill-popper than the parting words of a primary care server who has been gifted with a new drug by a pharmaceutical rep, “Here, try this.”

Elbert Hubbard, American philosopher, writer, and publisher (1856-1915) accurately noted long ago, “The worst thing about medicine is that one kind makes another necessary.” The pharmaceutical industry begs to differ: “The best thing about medicine is that one kind makes another necessary.” Perhaps H.L. Mencken summed it best: “One of the chief objects of medicine is to save us from the natural consequences of our vices and follies.”

In the meanwhile, Sir William, rest easy. Life expectancy is up 23 percent from your day and assisted-living facilities are making money hand over fist. ■■■■