

Virtual Mentor

American Medical Association Journal of Ethics
February 2001, Volume 3, Number 2: 57-59.

VIEWPOINT

A Doctor Looks at His Profession in Film

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***Doctors in the Movies: Boil the Water and Just Say Aah* by Peter Dans, MD (Medi-Ed Press, 2000)**

"Scratch almost any lawyer and you'll find a movie buff," states the first sentence in the Foreword of *Reel Justice: The Courtroom Goes to the Movies*. The same could probably said of physicians. Cinema has had an irresistible attraction to these two professions, showcasing them in various lights of grandeur and depravity. Who can forget the immortal lines of Al Pacino's character in ...*And Justice For All* (which incidentally received a poor review by the authors of *Reel Justice*). Or the brilliance of Charles Laughton's performance in *Witness for the Prosecution*? Similarly, who could forget the transformation of William Hurt's character in *The Doctor*? Or the mawkish manipulation of Robin Williams' title character in *Patch Adams*?

Although Hollywood often gets some of the details wrong about these two professions, its mythmaking has had an undeniable impact on the way millions of people view both lawyers and physicians. As Peter Dans, MD, writes in his new book, "Myth, like denial, is central to human existence. History may tell us what may have been, but myths tell us what we could have been and still might be, as well as what others think we are."

In the tradition of *Reel Justice*, *Doctors in the Movies* is a welcome contribution by a physician critiquing and interpreting the way films depict his profession. Dans's book is a compilation of reviews of 73 films that either focus on physicians or have a medical theme. Rather than taking an historical approach, Dans groups his films into broad themes, such as "Hollywood Goes to Medical School," "Benevolent Institutions," "The Dark Side of Doctors," and "The Institutions Turn Evil." He also spends a couple of chapters looking at films that have female or African-American physicians. Unfortunately, there is a dearth of such films, as reflected in his chapter titles—"Where are All the Women Doctors?" and "Blacks, the Invisible Doctors."

The tone of the book is casual yet informative. Dans confesses in his Introduction that "I have not been schooled in film technique or filmography and in this respect I feel more kinship with everyday moviegoers." He eschews any highfalutin theorizing about film, focusing instead on the aspects of movies that draw most people into dark theaters for a couple of hours: character development, plot, and pacing. Moreover, he is deeply interested in how the film showcases physicians. Does the film offer us old, tired stereotypes of the kindly country doctor? Or does it

accurately portray how physicians actually go about caring for their patients? (The book has a wonderful appendix where Dans recounts the myriad cliches and stereotypes in doctor movies. These range from old standbys such as "boil the water!" to recurrent scenes such as students fainting at the sight of blood. Another favorite of filmmakers, of course, is the physician as arrogant and godlike).

Unlike the authors of *Reel Justice*, Dans does not give ratings to the movies he has reviewed. But his feelings on certain movies come through loud and clear. For instance, he condemns *Patch Adams* as a "preachy, self-indulgent, vulgar film, starring an out of control Robin Williams, [which] elevates one doctor while demeaning the profession as a whole." On the other hand, his favorite film for use in "a seminar on movies and medicine" would be the cryptically titled *Not as a Stranger* starring Robert Mitchum, Olivia DeHaviland, and Frank Sinatra.

Trained as an internist, Dans also has an interest in ethics that surfaces occasionally. He devotes an entire chapter to the role oaths such as the Hippocratic Oath have played in films such as *The Green Light* (1937). Dans expresses concern about the dilution not only of the Oath, but also "the uncoupling of medicine from its ancient codes and any religious associations." Compared to films such as *The Green Light*, more recent films seem ambivalent about morality and medicine. For instance, he sees films such as *Critical Care* and *Extreme Measures* as reflecting medicine's moral confusion over many important matters. Dans argues that the physicians in such films, severed from traditional Hippocratic and Judeo-Christian values, are adrift from the traditions that anchored medicine for centuries. (I confess I have not seen *Extreme Measures*, despite Dans's view that it is "a veritable medical ethics textbook." I take issue, however, with his characterization of *Critical Care* as a "profane, unrelievedly angry and caustic film." I found the film to be a compelling story of moral redemption as told through the eyes of a beleaguered medical resident. Darkly funny at times, the film captures the new institutional pressures placed on young physicians these days.)

Despite the differences of opinion some readers may have with Dans's reviews, he does a service by showcasing older films that probably rarely see the light of day (save on such networks as AMC and TCM). Such films as *Men in White*, *The Citadel* and *People Will Talk* are all worth viewing and even integrating into a class on medical ethics. As Dans would attest, movies have the power to shape peoples' views and change their hearts. Many a lawyer watched Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* as a young person and decided that was the career path for him or her. Perhaps there is no single film about medicine that extols the profession in such a way, but the plethora of new television shows certainly attempts to capture the special nature of medicine: its urgency, its immediacy and its intimacy. Dans's book is a fine contribution in helping us think about how these celluloid images capture the specialness of being a doctor.

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