



Iowa City (IA): University of Iowa Press, 2002

ISBN 0-87745-798-0

Paperback: 212 pages

\$22.95

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Medical Readers' Theater: A Guide and Scripts

Todd L Savitt, Editor

Review by Vincent J Felitti, MD, FACP

The Permanente Journal is dedicated both to biomedicine and to humanism in medicine. Thus, *Medical Readers' Theater* is a singularly appropriate book to review in these pages. Of the medical books that are truly helpful, most have their value in their content; rarely does a book come along where equal value lies in the concept. This is such a book.

This book consists of 14 medically oriented stories, many written by physicians with recognized literary skills: William Carlos Williams, MD; Richard Selzer, MD; and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, MD. The short stories are divided into three categories: Physicians and Patients, Being a Physician, and Ethical and Social Issues. An imaginative faculty group at East Carolina University's School of Medicine adapted the stories into plays for informal enactment, the goal of which is to help the audience think and talk about those interpersonal aspects of everyday medical practice that are critically important to success, but sometimes carried out clumsily, thus not given consideration in our occasional analyses of why a case went well or poorly. A memorable story by the surgeon Richard Selzer deals with the emotions of the widow of a man whose organs she agreed to have

transplanted into several other people. The stories are adapted for a small cast, often with a narrator whose role is somewhat like that of a Greek Chorus.

The stories by themselves are interesting to read. Their adaptations for informal enactment by small groups are imaginatively done. And the *Questions for Discussion* at the end of each enactment are wonderfully probing, helpfully expanding our discussion and our understanding of what is going on and why. Those readers of this book who have seen any of the productions by Kaiser Permanente's (KP's) Educational Theater Program will be struck by the recognition that theater can have a major role in the education of physicians as well as of Health Plan members, even children. Advances often more readily occur at the interface of different fields. This book, as well as an understanding of the role of KP's Educational Theater Program, will provide meaningful benefit to those of us trying better to understand the remarkably wide range of implications of our contacts with patients, and why sometimes things go poorly when we did everything in a medically appropriate manner. ❖

The Delivery Room

A library, to modify the famous metaphor of Socrates,
should be the delivery room for the birth of ideas
—a place where history comes to life.

— Norman Cousins, 1915-1990, political journalist, author, professor, and world peace advocate