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## Deification of Doctors

Editor:

I would like to offer some observations on the dynamics and consequences of the deification of physicians.

Historically the role of the healer has been conceptualized as that of mediator between the owner/inhabitant of the body and the gods. (The term "the gods," is used herein to refer to all forces, natural and/or supernatural, which are generally perceived to be beyond human control). Furthermore, this historical model has traditionally placed ultimate responsibility for health and even life in the hands of the gods. However, as the western scientific world view matured during the post-renaissance era, a shift in paradigm or model occurred. The body came to be viewed much more directly as a machine, and healers came to be known as physicians, connoting their role as that of a sort of mechanic who was trained to repair and/or replace worn out and broken parts or to offer consultation to the owner/inhabitant regarding such repairs. In and of itself this shift had no drastic consequences. However, as the populace became more imbued with the scientific world view, the notion of a partnership between each individual and the gods became less popular. This left the owner/inhabitant of a body with an inordinate sense of responsibility for his or her own well-being.

It is at this point that a more ominous change in the popular paradigm took place. As people felt the burden of assuming full responsibility for their own well-being, they began to seduce physicians away from their role as mechanic and/or consultant, and into the role of a god. Initially the offer seemed quite attractive, since the compensation, in terms of financial reward and status, has been substantial. However, the fly in the ointment turns out to be the issue of responsibility. As physicians are given the role of gods, they are correspondingly held to be responsible for wielding the power of gods. Since by definition such power is not available to them, they inevitably encounter a great deal of difficulty when confronting their dissatisfied patients. This results in substantial stress for the physician, reflected quite dramatically in terms of the statistics pertaining to malpractice over the past two decades.

To correct this difficult state of affairs will require a clarification with regard to the limits of the physician's role. To the extent that it is possible to explain to patients that they must find their own ways of addressing the gods, and that the physician is simply available as a technician and as a consultant to them in the healing and maintenance of their body, a more satisfying balance can be achieved. Furthermore, such a clarification of roles should enhance the quality of health care, since the active participation of the patient will thereby be encouraged to the extent that greater efficacy is virtually assured.

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