

The Good Interne

H. B. ATLEE, M.D.*

The good interne is a priceless and unusual jewel, with one drawback: You get to depend on him to such an extent that when he is replaced by the usual run of shad you find that a crutch has slipped from under you and you are sliding on your ass. But while he is with you life is sweet.

What is a good interne? Let me tell you the story of Frank S. who was my interne during the early thirties. I had a rule in those days that all histories of patients admitted the previous day, had to be written up at 9 a.m. when I appeared on the scene. His uniqueness lay in the fact that he was the only interne who never failed to meet this deadline, and this endeared him to me mightily. There was an explanation that I learned later. In order to earn his way through college he played the piano in a three piece combo that provided the music for dances at such communities as Herring Cove, Prospect, Sheet Harbour, etc., and during the winter months they were constantly on the go. When he arrived home at the hospital from these terpsichorean forays at about 4 a.m. he went to the ward and took the histories before going to bed. He was not only thus an early bird with the worms, but I never knew him to balk at any extra duty, which he snapped to as though he had been asked to meet a Hollywood cutie, and one could always be sure he would do the job efficiently. In addition he was a bright boy. I don't mean that he won any medals or distinctions, but had a quick, lively and eager mind—which is much better. Just before Christmas that year he talked to me about his future. Where would he go? I advised him to tackle the biggest place that appealed to him. This happened to be Boston. I suggested that he slip off to the city for a few days during the holiday and do the rounds of the hospitals offering his service in any capacity. He came back a bit discouraged. All he could get was the promise that if an applicant at one hospital did not accept his residency he would be considered. The applicant didn't, so Frank got the job. As he was leaving for it in the spring, he asked me with a grin: "Have you any last words?" I assured him that, in his case, I didn't think I had. "But, 'I added,' if you want a sort of benedictory farewell, it's this: Attach yourself to the man you're working with in such a way that when your year is up he won't be able to get along without you. Put a crutch under both his arms and tie a urinal to his own. Support him—and service him."

This advice was, of course, completely supererogatory in his case. What happened was that he kept being invited to carry on as a resident until he was certifiable, and then his chief got him attached to the teaching department of a medical school and helped him start what turned out to be a very lucrative practice.

So my idea of a good interne is a guy with a lively mind who isn't afraid to work after five p.m.

One reason why the five p.m. deadline has become something like the laws of the Medes and Persians is a matrimonial one. Away back in the '30's a married interne was as scarce as roses outside an Eskimo igloo, and as often as not the result of having got the landlady's daughter in the family way. But partly because of the example of the veterans of the late war who entered medicine already married, and partly because credit is now easier than a Tahiti girl's virtue, it has become possible to not only get married, but buy a car and have a couple of babies by the time of graduation.

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I have long felt that it would be a wonderful thing for the medical world if the medical student could detach his gonads and put them in a deep freeze until he got through his residency. For, as it says in the Bible, you cannot serve God and Mamma. So you are more or less forced to leave off serving God at 5 p.m. and go home to serve Mamma. What is more Mamma has her own ideas about sacrifice. I'd had my eye on a boy for one of our residences. He had about everything in the way of qualifications for the job. He finally turned it down, saying: "I really can't ask my wife to sacrifice herself for another three years. She's already done it for five—and there's the three kids to consider".

I don't think we can blame Mamma entirely. After all there isn't as much glamor in looking after three kids in a basement cubbyhole flat as there is in hoicking out uteri. Just the same I wish that deep freeze was a possibility.

Not that the present situation is not partly our fault as teachers. In our desperate efforts to keep up with knowledge, we have taken the easiest (for us) way. We have kept adding years. When I entered medicine it was a four year course without any compulsory internship or residency, and you entered from Grade XI. Now it's five years basic and nine if you specialize, with from three to four years in Arts and Science as admission. This means that by the time a man is ready to practice he's practically a grandfather. He has begun to slide downhill physically, and he only has about ten years of intellectually creative life left. (Since with very few exceptions we only play variations on the old tunes after forty.) No wonder our students feel they should marry while they can still be any good at it.

I have a feeling that presently we teachers will come to our senses and try to so streamline and improve our teaching that we can cover the same ground in five or six years that we now do in nine. The reason we haven't done so already is because we are mostly over 40 years old, when it is hard to entertain new or creative or revolutionary ideas. But as I look around the present medical world, I see the urgent need of the steam of young and creative brains—which means to begin with steam produced by the élan vital, and creativity from the brains of men under thirty.

But to return to the good interne, as a matter of fact to return to any young man on the threshold of life, I believe that of all the favourable qualities, an eagerness and willingness to work over and above the call of ordinary duty, is the primest. Scholarship is good, but eagerness is better, somehow rust seems to settle on the too scholarly. And if you can add to this the sort of intelligence that can make proper use of what it observes, and think without reference to the page of a textbook, the resultant should make a pretty good interne—even if it does leave Mamma restive.

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