



ALWAYS — ON CALL —

The Dreaded Cocktail Party Consult

Is a doctor ever off duty when a medical question can be posed anywhere, at any time, by anybody? Maybe not, but there are graceful ways to handle the situations. . . and there are times when all you can do is laugh.

By Beth Weinhouse • Illustrations by Juliette Borda

A doctor and a lawyer are talking at a cocktail party. “Tell me,” says the doctor. “You must get buttonholed at parties all the time for legal advice. How do you handle that?” “Well,” said the lawyer. “I listen to the person’s question, answer it as best as I can. And then when I get home, I send them a bill. That person never asks me a question at a party again.” “That’s great advice!” exclaims the doctor. “I’m going to try that.” Two days later, in the mail, the doctor receives the lawyer’s bill.

Jokes aside, doctors are probably even more vulnerable than lawyers to “cocktail party consults,” where people ask for free medical

advice at inappropriate times and places. The consults don’t occur only at parties, but can happen absolutely anywhere, and often where and when you least expect them. Once people hear there’s a physician present, there’s no holding back. You can be sitting down in the auditorium about to watch your daughter’s third-grade play, when the mother of one of her classmates wants to tell you about—and maybe show you—the suspicious lump she found in her breast. Or you’re taking out the garbage when the guy next door wants to ask you about the cough he can’t shake. No place is safe. Obviously we’re not talking about emergency situations, such as when you’re flying

over the Atlantic, hours from home, and a passenger several aisles away starts having severe chest pains. Then you’d no doubt spring into

DINNER TABLE

“Once when I was having dinner with my wife’s family, her grandfather spit into a napkin to show me his sputum. I see sputum all the time at work, but still...” --Pulmonologist, Boston, MA

“We had some neighbors over to dinner one night. One of them pulled off his shirt right at the dinner table to show me his rash. Strange.” --Internist, northern NJ



‘Let me try to squeeze you into a 5:00 slot and we can get you taken care of.’



action without a second thought, glad you could help. But if that same passenger just sauntered down the aisle and wanted to chat about the medication his own physician prescribed for his occasional chest pains... well, that's a different story. No doubt you'd much prefer to be enjoying a glass of red wine and watching the in-flight movie. Fortunately there's a vast area between being exploited and being rude. Read on to find out some better ways to handle these situations whenever and wherever they occur.

GOOD MANNERS, BAD MEDICINE?

Of course you want to be nice, and often you want to help. Many of the people asking your advice are your family, your friends, your neighbors, your kids' friends' parents. But these impromptu consults are doubly tricky to deal with, because besides forcing you to be professional during your off hours, they can be bad medicine, too. In a New England Journal of Medicine article last year titled, "No Appointment Necessary? Ethical Challenges in Treating Friends and Family," the authors remind readers that the American College of Physicians recently updated its ethi-

DROPPING TROU

"A few years ago a television repair man came to the house. When he found out I was a doctor, he pulled down his pants to show me a lump in his groin. Right in my living room! Turns out it was a hernia." —Gastroenterologist, northern NJ

"One of my hypochondriac socialite friends who always seems too busy to spend any meaningful time with me, recently asked me to meet him urgently. We met in midtown Manhattan, near Grand Central Station. He then proceeded to pull down his pants right in the middle of 42nd Street for me to inspect his butt... that was suffering from a minor pimple." —Psychiatrist/Neurologist, New York City, NY

cal principles and asserted that doctors should "usually not enter into the dual relationship of physician-family member or physician-friend." That said, they recognized that a majority of doctors had been put into the role of caregiver for a family or friend, writing, "Studies have shown that physicians often feel pressured and conflicted about requests to treat friends and family and that most physicians have declined at least one request or indicated that they would consider declining..." When you're asked your advice in a social situation, you don't have the benefit of

a medical history or physical exam. The question might not be in your specialty. You might have had a few drinks. None of these are optimal conditions for providing good medical care. But besides that, you're off duty, trying to enjoy a night out with your partner or friends, or to spend quality time with your children. You have a right to be protective of your free time in non-emergency situations. Be Nice Etiquette Advice So what's a nice guy (or gal) physician to do? You can maintain your social boundaries without having to resort to the lawyer's strategy in the opening joke for deflecting these ambushes. Lizzie Post, great-great-granddaughter of famed etiquette expert Emily Post and co-author of Emily Post's Etiquette 18th Edition, recommends being polite but direct. "You can say something like, 'It's not that I think your condition is serious, but it's just that I need to look at this when I'm in the right mindset, and this isn't a great time. Let's set up an appointment.' Or simply, 'Without knowing more and without setting up an appointment, I don't want to take a guess.'" Post continues, "If it's someone you know personally, I would try to be accom-

modating with your schedule. That might be why someone is approaching you at a social occasion—because they can't get an appointment any time soon. You can say something like, 'Let me try to squeeze you into a 5:00 slot and we can get you taken care of.'" If these lines don't work, and your social patient is insistent, Post advises you stick to your guns, saying something like, "Jim, we're here for dinner. Why don't we set up an appointment? I really don't want to do this right now." You can get over your discomfort about dismissing potential patients this way by thinking of your

own best interests in these encounters, too. Do you really want to be giving advice when you haven't examined someone? Or worse, when you've been drinking? (And maybe it goes without saying, but under no account

BARBER SHOPS AND HAIR SALONS

"I ran into a patient and her father while my son was getting his hair cut at a barbershop. While the father was waiting to get his hair cut, he took the time to show me his daughter's skin rash (probably eczema). I didn't really mind because it was a quick, easy look and it gave him some peace of mind."

—Pediatrician, Atlanta, GA

"My hairstylist pulled her pants down in the middle of the salon while she was coloring my hair. She wanted me to look at her congenital butt deformity. I had never treated her; it was bizarre." —Plastic Surgeon, Kansas City, KS

ever consider doing one of these informal consults, especially if it involves disrobing, without someone else present.) Last year the etiquette authority Judith Martin, writing in The Washington Post as Miss Manners, advised a young woman who was just beginning medical practice about handling social situations. This doctor was unhappy about the reaction she was getting to her profession at social events, when people either gushed about what an angel she was for treating sick people, or launched into their own—or a friend's or family member's—detailed health histories that completely destroyed the mood of the occasion. She wondered if she should try to hide her profession. Miss Manners' response? "Whatever is said about your profession, your response should be, 'Well, it's the kind of job that makes you grateful to get away among friends and talk about something else.'" Say it with a smile, recommended Miss Manners, and "then turn to someone else and say, 'I imagine you feel the same way about your work.'" Anyone with a job should understand your need for time

off. Finally, here's another strategy you can try. Instead of confronting your questioner or even politely deflecting him or her, you can gently turn the tables, as this California internist did when a landscaper—and

not the doctor's own landscaper—started asking for medical advice. "I started telling him about one of the trees in my yard that wasn't doing well," the doctor recalls. "I started to describe what the leaves looked like. He stopped me, very annoyed, and told me that I should call a landscaper to come out and deal with the issue. He went on to tell me that he couldn't possibly diagnosis the tree without all of the information. Then, finally, the light bulb went on. He stopped asking me about his medical problems." Not that you ever thought you were the only one dealing with this situation, but just for your amusement, we've collected a few stories from doctors about the strangest times they've been asked for medical advice. (Names and some identifying details have been changed or withheld to prevent embarrassment.) If you find yourself reading these stories and thinking you can one-up them, let us know. Send your funniest, strangest most inappropriate medical consult stories to editorial@physicianslifemag.com, and we'll try to publish a follow-up collection in a future issue.

AND THE OSCAR FOR MOST INAPPROPRIATE MEDICAL CONSULT GOES TO...

"I went to the Oscars last year—yes, the Academy Awards—and while dressed in black-tie, was asked by a producer who I had just met what I thought about the treatment he'd been prescribed for arthritis, and whether I thought he should be taking another medication. He was ready to hike up his tux slacks to show me his knees. He set his champagne glass on the table and started to grab his pant legs when I had to stop him and advise him to see his personal doctor in the morning."

—Internist, San Diego, CA



‘Without all the information, I don't want to take a guess.’

