

## **Bedside Manners: Curb your Docs**

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My senior partner strutted down the hall in our office, 'bearing' a close resemblance to Balloo from Jungle Book. As he drew near, under his breath I could hear the strains of the immortal tune...

"Zippidy Doo Dah, Zippity Yay...  
My oh my, What a Wonderful Day..."

Yes!!!! We'd done it! We had proven that doctors COULD be trained!

Hiding my smile, I stepped back into my office, closed the door, and telephoned Linda, an endoscopy nurse at the hospital.

Whether doctors can be trained or manipulated is not really open to question... you really don't think that the pharmaceutical industry spends so much money on pens and pads emblazoned with drug names because they want to make sure that our children have enough writing implements? Nah, I'm sure that a bunch of money has been spent proving that we docs are quite suggestible and subliminally directed. But now we'd proved that we could do it in a clinical setting.

The scam—we wanted to see if we could subliminally plant a song in the brain of a physician. The locale- at the endoscopy suite of our local hospital, we would have Linda, one of the two nurses staffing his room over a couple hours, hum a preselected song under her breath while working with him. We chose carefully—it had to be infectious, but not too deviant—imaging not being able to rid yourself of "It's a Small World After All"!?! My role was to measure the outcome...had the inoculation taken?

It had worked, and David had no idea where the cheery tune, not heard perhaps for decades, had sprung. We had achieved mind control!

Why should you care? Well, much of the responsibility for our ongoing nursing shortage, after low wages and erratic schedules, comes from the incivility of our doctor and colleagues. And not only does this rude behavior lead to staff shortages and departure from careers in medicine—uncivil behavior can have a negative impact on patient outcomes as shown in studies in the ICU setting by Shortell (1994) and Knaus (1986). Patients in uncivil and mean environments were shown variously to have higher death rates or longer lengths of stay in the hospital. Civil units had an easier time retaining their nursing staffs. Thus, we need to teach hospital staff the tools to take control over rude behavior in our hospitals, both for our patients' sakes and for the staff's own well-being.

Please note that David had lost the song by morning. I do not preach that we can change your doctors or co-workers overall behaviors, alter personality forever, or cure cancer. However, when I read about control of obnoxious behavior in others being impossible, that "you can only change your own reactions to it", I say an unqualified "Horse feathers"! What a passive and psychologically injurious way to allow others to wound you with verbal aggression.

Physicians and your co-workers are smart, and are trainable. We are at least as smart as dogs, perhaps not as smart as cats. You will not be able to affect a life change, a persona change. But you should be able to train us to act in an appropriate manner when around you, the trainer.

Lets carry this dog-training analogy along further. A vicious pit bull can get trained, but is no less vicious. A retriever is trainable, but started out lovable. We do not propose to change the basic nature of the beast, just to school them in appropriate collegial behavior.

Lets talk about what usually happens when a doctor acts up. The current scenario at most hospitals are that the doctor gets “cranky”, and then takes it out on the nurses. The abused nurse speaks to the charge nurse, who asks her to report it in writing to administration. Several days later, it is received in administration, reviewed by committee, and a form letter is generated after the next scheduled committee meeting in about a month telling the doc to “be nicer to the nurses”, but being very vague on details. The doctor’s miffed. He/she can’t recall the incident, and had someone told them of the problem, then they could have corrected their actions. Miffed, the pissed-off doctor goes on rounds, and the world continues to spin on its unending cycle.

What is this like to the offending doctor in dog terms? Think of the doctor as a somewhat clueless puppy, newly acquired, who has just piddled in the middle of your new white living room rug. You’re upset immediately, but don’t say anything to the dog. Then one month goes by, and...

**WHAM!!!** Out comes your rolled up newspaper!

And the puppy thinks.... “HUH? What’d I do?”

No way to train a dog, is it?

Here’s the thing—you’ve got to hit us with the newspaper right at the time of the event if you want to make a change in our behavior. It will take a commitment on your part, but you will end up with a well-trained dog over time, at least in your home and specifically with regards to piddling.

Thus we need to teach specific behavior training techniques for verbal aggression in the hospital setting. The rolled up newspaper (figuratively please!) is quite direct, and most of us are not brave enough to face the offender down. However there are some oblique and even subliminal behavior modifications that you can implement to control the behavior of your docs and your more unruly colleagues.

If you choose to take control and change your working environment, you must remember three things:

**Be persistent.**

Following the puppy analogy, the puppy doesn’t get it right with just the first whack. Don’t give up and return the puppy to the pet store when he piddles for only the second time!

**Be consistent.**

The puppy can’t get mixed signals. Every infraction of behavior must be met with the same measured newspaper whack, immediately after the infraction. If the puppy sometimes gets away with adverse behavior, where does that lead? A very confused, poorly behaved dog and a new, darker colored living room rug.

**Be insistent.**

You deserve a nice, sane, friendly, courteous, collaborative workplace. You have the power to train your colleagues and docs to make it so. Just do it. Curb your docs.

physicians and nurses to rediscover their joy in medicine and to learn to first "Turn Care Inward". Her book, "Don't Jettison Medicine: Resuscitate Your Passion For The Career You Loved!" is available now. Visit [www.RxForSanity.com](http://www.RxForSanity.com) soon for complimentary information and links to better care for yourself and for your staff, and to subscribe to our FREE monthly newsletter, Rx For Sanity™ eNews, with medical humor and simple tips to enhance your life in Medicine.  
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