

A Cat Scan a Day Keeps the Lawyers Away: Rules & Observations for the '90s

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Doctors have been writing about their patients for years. In fact, long before the first double-blind studies were carried out, doctors recorded the signs and symptoms of most human diseases. No one could do anything to treat these diseases, of course, but it must have been comforting for patients to know how and when they would meet their maker. It also gave them time to settle up their overdue accounts.

In addition to the technical writings of such great figures as Hippocrates and others, doctors have coined hundreds of witty sayings that illustrate important rules of medicine. The most famous of these sayings is *Primum non nocere*, which is Latin for "Don't miss anything." Other classics include, "When in doubt, cut it out," "All bleeding stops," and that indispensable rule for the wards, "The first thing to do at a code is to check your own pulse." My own personal favorite is the true meaning of the initials WNL: "we never looked."

Despite the wealth of observations that have accumulated over the years, today's doctors are too busy fighting with Medicare to come up with more than a few expletives. To remedy this situation, I decided to concoct some rules and observations of my own:

There have been three great advances in the history of medicine: penicillin, CAT scans, and the afternoon off.

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There are two types of services in our society—those that require appointments and those where you wait in line. Then there are doctor's visits, where you get to do both.

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A pearl is a nugget of wisdom bestowed by an attending to a grateful medical student—right before he asks him to do some scut.

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A doctor does not live by bread alone—he also needs patients.

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When in doubt, write illegibly.

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There are two goals for every patient who's admitted to a VA hospital. One is to keep the patient alive. The other is to make sure someone else does the discharge summary.

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You know you're an attending when:

- you give advice more than you ask for it.
- you sit on more committees than you have letters in your name.
- the nurses expect you to bring the donuts.

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When you hear hoofbeats, think of horses, not zebras. Also, try not to step in anything.

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There are two rules that all medical students must learn:
Rule #1. The attending is always right.
Rule #2. Don't forget Rule #1.

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To get the same opinion from a group of three specialists, two of them must be on vacation.

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Sitting through Grand Rounds is like eating a plate of vegetables: you know it's good for you, but you'd rather have fries.

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Experience is what you rely on when you haven't read anything for a while.

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Dermatologists always sleep through the night.

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A rare disease is something you'll never diagnose yourself. However, if you live long enough, you'll probably get one.

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The only way a patient will get better on a QID medication is if he didn't need it in the first place.

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A doctor is the happiest twice in his life: the day he hangs his diploma up, and the day he takes it down.

I cut, therefore I am.

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Life is short and vacations are shorter, but paperwork is eternal.

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Rules of the wards:

- Your sickest patient never speaks English.
- There are no interesting cases after midnight.
- Never pull a good IV.
- Old charts are always missing.
- The best vein is always the last one you check.
- Never use small words when big ones will do.
- When all else fails, turf the patient.

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Rules of primary care:

- Patients always get better after they call for an appointment.
- If a spouse accompanies a patient, the visit will take twice as long.
- Patients always develop the side effect you forgot to mention.
- There's always a virus going around.
- Beepers work better if you turn them on.
- Specialists never wait on hold.