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Is there an actor in the house?

by Barbara Hoffman


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IS THERE AN ACTOR IN THE HOUSE?

Can hitting an imaginary golf ball or making up stories make you a better physician? Doctors at Manhattan's Lenox Hill and Brooklyn's Long Island College Hospital think so. They're giving their medical residents classes in theatrical improvisation.

The classes, complete with role-playing and imaginary props, are as mandatory as being on call. Such theatrics are a far cry from anything the fledgling doctors have been taught at medical school. "We get so focused we lose sight of the big picture," says Dr. Zeev Neuwirth, Lenox Hill's medical educator (and lifelong theater lover), who brought the Performance of Doctoring program to the hospital last year. "The behavior we've been trained in — 'I'm the expert, I will tell you what to do and you'll do it' — is not good for us or our patients."

"Sure, we have to know our stuff," Neuwirth adds. "But improvisation teaches you to be comfortable about not knowing what will come next. It forces you to actively listen — and be creative in your response."

And that, he says, makes for better doctoring — especially in this era of managed care. Adds David Nackman, the actor/director who leads the classes: "If you don't know more about this person than their symptoms, you haven't done your job."

Dr. Susan Massad, who started the classes at Long Island College Hospital (LICH) six years ago, has seen the difference herself — most strikingly after Sept. 11, when a young Pakistani resident was treating a woman who'd fled the World Trade Center. Two days later, her eyes still burned. But that was the least of her problems.

"The resident didn't just focus on her eyes, because that wasn't her major concern," Massad recalls. "He sensed that what she really needed to do was to talk and so he went with that, asking her questions and listening. "Would he have had those skills without the [improv] class? No."

Recently, half a dozen twenty-something residents gathered in a boardroom at Lenox Hill, where Nackman — who once trod the boards opposite Joan Rivers in a production of "Broadway Bound" — led them in a series of exercises.

Not all the residents seemed enthralled. In fact, a few looked as if they'd rather be undergoing root canal.

But as the hour-long session progressed, their reserve melted. Soon they were telling a story about a young couple flying off to the beach — each one in turn adding one sentence at a time — when Nackman stopped them, stymied by a reference to "the mile-high club."

"What's that?" he asked.

The resident shrugged. "Everyone knows what that is," he said. "Sex in an airplane." "Rule No. 1," Nackman said. "Even if almost everyone knows what you're talking about, it's your responsibility to make sure everyone knows it. Sometimes patients are too intimidated to ask.

Later, the resident, David Baum, was asked if he thought the class would help him.

"It does make you think about taking an extra two minutes to just listen to the patient," he acknowledged, "and not citing things in medical jargon."

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