
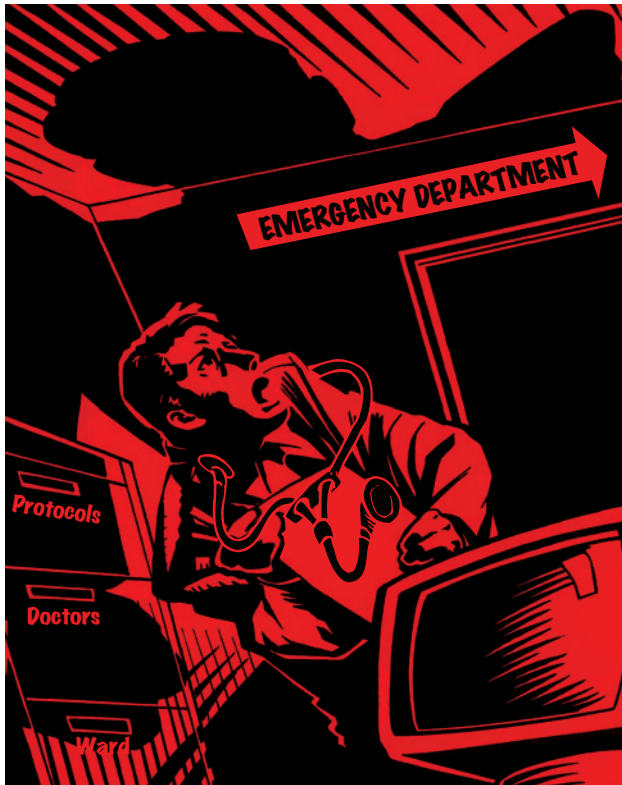


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ACADEMIC ABSENTEEISM

In the 19th century, academics and clinicians travelled to Europe to learn the latest advances in medical science and clinical practice. German medicine was at its zenith, and its stars — Koch, Billroth, Virchow and others — were the drawcards at international medical congresses, events which regularly attracted up to 10000 delegates from over 50 countries. Those attending a congress usually spent their time visiting laboratories and clinics in European capitals, such as Berlin, Paris or London.

But this was also the era of difficult travel over land and sea, so decisions to attend a conference were not taken lightly. Thankfully, the choice of conferences was limited.

No more. Most international destinations can now be reached within a day, and the choice of conferences is overwhelming. One has only to enter “international medical congress” into Google and more than a quarter of a million sites spew forth. This burgeoning of meetings has practical consequences, such as depleting the numbers of academics present in faculties at any given time. Indeed, this regular absenteeism has prompted the pejorative, “absent professors”, and given rise to riddles with a particular sting:

“Why is the Medical Faculty like the US Strategic Air Command?”

“Because 30% or more of its professors are in the air at any one time.”

Does all this matter?

The absence of professors while they attend conferences or sit on research committees reflects the reality in academic medicine — that research is valued far more than teaching. Paradoxically, the word “professor” means to profess — to teach. The absence of professors means that this task is delegated to junior staff. Surely this behaviour makes a mockery of the title “Professor”.

Perhaps a new academic adage — “travel rather than teach” — should now be added to “publish or perish”.



Martin B Van Der Weyden

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