

Norman Rockwell Museum, Stockbridge, Massachusetts, January 27, 2007
“Picturing Health: Norman Rockwell and 14 of Today’s Most Prominent Visual Communicators” <http://www.nrm.org>

Keynote Address by Dr. Ronald Hoffman

Good evening ladies and gentleman, and thanks for inviting me to speak to you tonight.

Norman Rockwell is idealistic, and optimistic. His paintings might seem quaint and anachronistic, but they are not without whimsy and subtle irony, guided by Rockwell’s attuned sensibilities. Although he found a patron in the pharmaceutical industry, he was not merely a mercenary or one-dimensional commercial propagandist for the American drug industry.

When Rockwell began his career, confidence in medicine was reaching its apogee with the scientific revolution of the mid-20th Century. Antibiotics and vaccines were promising to vanquish disease. High-tech imaging was in its infancy. After the Depression, efforts were underway to improve sanitation and nutrition when it was discovered that nearly half of WWII draftees were malnourished and medically unfit. Penicillin had just been invented. In the 1950s, the polio vaccine was developed. There was reason for optimism.

Our medical heroes on TV reflect the sea-change in attitudes toward American medicine that occurred in the last half of the Twentieth Century: Dr. Kildare and Ben Casey (if you preferred hairy arms), followed by the sage and patient Dr. Marcus Welby, to “ER” (don’t expect to be greeted by George Clooney if you end up in one) to Dr. Gregory House of the hit Fox TV show by that name, the ornery yet masterful infectious disease specialist who’s epitomizes the opposite of good bedside manner. He yells at his patients. He’s addicted to painkillers. He breaks every rule in the hospital. He wears blue jeans, and he doesn’t even shave.

So what’s the message of Hugh Laurie, the actor who portrays House? In an interview with WebMD magazine he says: “There are no clear and immediate answers to medical problems,”

Hugh Laurie was quoted as saying “I have great reverence for the practice of medicine—I’m a great believer in Western Medicine and all its wonders.” He continued: “The average lay patient assumes or hopes that as soon as he walks into a clinic his condition will immediately become [clear] and the course of treatment will be immediately apparent.” Of course, this isn’t the case in reel--or real--life. “A lot of times, doctors are groping with conflicting therapies and things that work—and don’t work—and they really have to improvise.”

It turns out that Laurie’s father was a Dr.—a mild-mannered physician in the old tradition.

What happened to medicine to change the rosy picture that Rockwell painted for us? These are themes I write about in my latest book: *How to Talk with Your Doctor*.

The De-deification of the doctor: Fallibility, irony, and medical uncertainty, are the themes of medical dramas today. TV shows are more Franz Kafka than Norman Rockwell. This parallels the erosion of physician authority with the rise of HMOs, cost-containment, and guidelines.

There is the constant threat of suits, Medicaid and Medicare fraud, all of these factors have contributed to doctors and patients being thrown together almost as adversaries, rather than the allies they are meant to be.

Depersonalization & technology: Longer stethoscopes! Robot surgeons! Whole body scans!

Profit Motive: Medicine has become big business, doctors are entrepreneurs, or worse, mere employees of powerful corporate HMOs.

Rushed Care: The antithesis of the idealized vision of Rockwell is the 8 minute doctor's visit!

Debacles: Side effects, failed drugs, and therapies relegated to the scrap-heap of medical history. Fallibility undermines public trust in medicine.

The De-Paternalization of Medicine: Patients are now active participants, witness the leveling of the playing field, the medical information revolution, speeded by the Internet. Even doctors rely on Google according to a recent article! Self-empowerment and the knowledge revolution are the ways of the future

The advent of Complementary Medicine: New emphasis on diet, lifestyle, self-care as part of patient empowerment.

This exhibit illustrates all these themes and beautifully updates and carries forward the Norman Rockwell tradition of depiction of medical themes.

America has always had a love-hate relationship with doctors and medicine. By the end of the 19th century medicine was in disarray and the doctors were the subject of disparagement as “leeches” “quacks” and “saw-bones.”

Standardization of training, patent medicine, and new technology fought to regain public confidence. The FDA was actually a response to a crisis in confidence about the safety of medicine in the early Twentieth Century.

A lot of Rockwell's paintings celebrate the theme of normal growth and vitality, such as the famous one of a young boy measuring himself against pencil marks on the wall—this

in age where the scourge of rickets was being conquered. Another shows a plump baby being weighed—just as low-birth weight infants and infant mortality were being conquered with better nutrition and peri-natal care.

There's also the theme of confidence in the omniscient, gentle physician, and in the simple rites of medicine like writing a prescription, taking the pulse or the temperature, and peering into the throat. I recall receiving just such housecall in the middle of the night by a kindly but tired looking physician in the Rockwell mold. The popular image of the kindly old doctor taking care of a little girl's dolly is so iconic an image of all-encompassing love and healing that one of my patients once sent me a post-card of that painting with my picture superimposed on the doctor's face!

But that era is long past, the house call is synonymous with the dodo bird, so what do we have to replace Rockwell's imagery in the post-modern era of medicine?

Mark Ulriksen celebrates the Longevity Revolution in a painting showing seniors blowing out a myriad of candles. He pokes fun at controversies in medicine—a theme far-removed from the ordered, bucolic world of Rockwell—with a painting showing dueling obstetricians brandishing the speculum, on the one hand, versus the subdural injection used to ease birth pangs. He enters the arena of preventive medicine by caricaturing overweight Americans. Note that we have come a long way from Rockwell in 50 years: Rockwell's paintings extol the milestones of normal human growth, as if malnutrition were lurking, fat baby on the scale—Ulrich fingers over-nutrition as the looming threat to America's health!

Juliette Borda personifies the move toward integrative medicine in a painting showing a doctor balancing an Rx in one hand, the herbal remedy St. John's Wort in another. She gives a nod toward patient power in another, admonishing patients to go beyond the idealized trust in their doctors that Rockwell frequently portrays. There is even a great painting that I may use a copy of in my examining room: Good fat Bad fat highlights the difference between the apple vs the pear shape of fat distribution, an anatomical giveaway for insulin resistance that is a harbinger of diabetes and heart disease. In another satirical but anatomically eloquent painting, an apple shaped woman contemplates a pear.

Irony is not absent from the paintings of Guy Billout. In one entitled "Betting your Life," a lone figure flees a dragon which personifies illness, towards two doctors, each pointing in the opposite direction. Another of Mr. Billout's paintings is almost the antithesis of the highly composed, luminous, classic composition used by Rockwell to show the compassionate doctor using the stethoscope on the boy while the mother looks on. In Billout's painting, automated medicine is satirized with a doctor applying a traditional stethoscope to the patient, but the bored-looking doctor is merely an accessory to an electronic printout. Automation also takes over in a *NY Times* cartoon by Elwood Smith, which satirizes on-line medicine.

Cora Lynn Deibler undoubtedly commits what would be considered in Rockwell's era to be heresy: She exhorts patients to rate doctors, skewering them for being distracted

confusing and impatient. But she still strives for the Rockwell ideal: Doctors who show caring and compassion.

The medicalization of natural phenomena is the theme of a great cover for the *New Yorker* showing a rabbit family getting an ultrasound at the ob-gyn's office. It's even more ironic, in light of recent studies that show that high-infant monitoring does little to alter infant mortality or birth outcomes, and doesn't even do much to forestall C-sections.

Finally, lest idealism about medicine be lost amid modern cynicism, there're the beautiful and gentle images of Whitney Sherman, and the other contemporary artists now on exhibit at the Norman Rockwell Museum, showing that medicine, although cloaked in a new garb, still hasn't lost the heart it showed in the paintings of Norman Rockwell over fifty years ago.