



# My second-favourite medical journal

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*Summer afternoon—summer afternoon; to me those have always been the two most beautiful words in the English language.*

Henry James

Although we live in the age of the Internet, most readers of *Canadian Family Physician* prefer to receive the print version of the journal. One of the reasons, they have told us in our readership survey, is because they like to save up their back issues and take them away on their summer holidays at the lake so they can languidly catch up on their medical reading. My second-favourite “medical” journal, the one whose back issues I lug up to the cottage so I can catch up on my reading, is *The New Yorker*. Each issue is so packed full of great writing (not to mention cartoons) on a range of topics of the day, including great medical writing, that for much of the year it is impossible to keep up.

*The New Yorker* has a long tradition of fine writing on medicine beginning with Berton Roueche, an American journalist who wrote for the magazine for almost 50 years, from 1944 until his death in 1994. One of my favourite pieces, published in the October 15, 1960, edition, is called simply “Placebo.”<sup>1</sup> It begins with the delightful opening sentence “The most widely used drugs in the modern medicine cabinet are not really drugs at all” and takes us on a journey that includes the etymology of the word, identifies its first use in English (*The Canterbury Tales*), and describes then-current medical research on the effects of placebos in various clinical studies.

In 1998, Dr Jerome Gropman, a hematologist-oncologist at the Harvard Medical School and the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston, Mass, became a staff writer at the magazine. Over the past 16 years he has contributed thoughtful, often provocative, and always erudite articles on topics ranging from Richard Nixon’s failed “war on cancer” to the uncertain science of “male menopause.” One of the best pieces that he wrote, which was about the prostate cancer paradox,<sup>2</sup> clearly and succinctly explains the biology of the disease and why screening for it using the prostate-specific

antigen test might cause more harm than good. I have used the article to explain to patients, as well as residents, the crux of this ongoing dilemma. The article remains as relevant today as it was more than a decade ago.

The most recent physician addition to the writing staff of the magazine is Atul Gawande, a Brooklyn-born staff surgeon at the Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston and the author of several books on patient safety and health quality improvement. One of my favourite pieces by Gawande addresses one of the biggest challenges not just to medicine but to many societies—that of dealing with the fact that medicine has increased the ranks of the elderly, but has been unable to make aging any easier.<sup>3</sup> In it he provides us with a short tour of the biology of aging, but what makes the article compelling are the stories of aging, especially as told by Dr Felix Silverstone, himself a geriatrician for almost half a century and now grappling with the problems of growing old.

The April 7, 2014, edition of the magazine contains one of my recent favourite medical pieces, “Final Forms,”<sup>4</sup> by American journalist Kathryn Schulz. It is a brief history and a reflection on what the author calls “the vast, macabre bureaucracy to answer the question of why we die,” and it begins with the antecedent of the modern death certificate, England’s Bill of Mortality, which emerged in the early 16th century. It is a fantastic bit of medical history.

What is it that these articles and these 4 writers spanning more than 70 years have in common? First is the commitment to fine writing that is the hallmark of the magazine going back to its very beginning. Just as important is that each of these excellent writers is given the space to tell their stories in depth so they can provide a broader social and cultural context without oversimplifying, and with a kind of scholarship and erudition that is worn very lightly.

Enjoy your summer reading!



### References

1. Roueche B. Placebo. *The New Yorker* 1960 Oct 15. p. 85-103.
2. Gropman J. The prostate paradox. *The New Yorker* 2000 May 29. p. 52-64.
3. Gawande A. The way we age now. *The New Yorker* 2007 Apr 30. p. 50-9.
4. Schulz K. Final forms. *The New Yorker* 2014 Apr 7. p. 32-7.

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Cet article se trouve aussi en français à la page 693.