

Doctors have been interrupting my schedule for the past several weeks. The details of their visits are inconsequential as far as this column is concerned. Television writers cover the medical field to an extent that watching the nighttime shows is like working a shift in an emergency ward. And our dry rangelands provide sufficient scenes of ailing livestock without adding human ailments to the situation.

However, I have been learning a lot about the doctoring business by dealing with them. Ranchers can't find a better business associate than a member of the medical profession. Doctors, as you know, are the world's best prospects for land and livestock. They buy so much land that medical schools ought to add a course in real estate to their curriculum. Doctor's satchels today should come equipped with separate compartments to carry abstracts and land maps.

Two or three hot epidemics are all it takes to buy a fair sized cow outfit. Counting what fees air pollution and cigarette smoking bring in, a doctor has to be a pretty big dumbhead to stay poor for any length of time. Modern vaccines have hurt the trade, but improved transportation has taken up the slack by spreading germs to every corner of the universe. Unless a flu patient is bedridden, he can contaminate Boston and Dallas on the same weekend.

The healer I'm currently supporting is the poorest judge of patients on the hoof that I've run across. He can't tell a thing by feeling your pulse or listening to your heart beat. His forte is examination through sharp-pointed internal scopes, plus x-ray pictures that cost more to produce than a wide screen movie. Of course these experiments are hosted at my expense. Well not completely, because the doctor does supply a couple of crotchety nurses and a few instruments. My part is to furnish the target areas and the money. It's about the same arrangement that they have prepared for the customers out at Las Vegas, except Vegas uses shill girls and wheels for props instead of worn out magazines and cranky nurses.

The grandest days are the ones when you don't have to walk down public corridors wearing a split-in-the-back nightgown. Prince Charles couldn't keep his dignity clothed in one of those flair-ended models. Incense burning mystics would be repulsed at the idea of putting their patients on parade without their breech cloths. You never heard of a medicine man trying to ward off the evil spirits by sending a sick man walking around in a white gown that wasn't as carefully tailored as a beggar's tent.

On the last visit, this licensed prober tried to send me to the hospital for a couple of days. He was 15 years too late to pull off that trick.

Back when my third son was born, I overheard one nurse telling another white-cap that three of the hospital's leading doctors had bought a tombstone manufacturing outfit across the street from the clinic.

Conflict of interest isn't that difficult to define. Handle your health problems however you wish, but don't completely forget how the wheel of life ends. I thought these healers were getting smart enough when they put the midwives out of business.

Furthermore, you can hardly go to a hospital now without them finding some excuse to put you to sleep. People are mighty foolish who let that happen. What would you do if you talked enough in your sleep to donate your gall bladder to the patient next door, or awakened to discover that you traded your liver for a couple of Shetland ponies?

With this transplanting business going full blast, a fellow could end up giving away half of his working parts when he couldn't afford to lose one screw. Two or three sniffs of ether could cause him to be more generous than his body could stand to spend. I know I've seen old boys get so jugged up on alcohol that they'd have given away both hind legs and their rib cages if anybody had wanted them. Considering the demand for second hand hearts or used Adam's apples, I'd be afraid to take a nap in a waiting room, much less crawl up on an operating table. The market on used parts is going to be the downfall of a lot of trusting people.

How much longer this hammering and probing will take hasn't been revealed. The doctor's interest will probably wane as he sees how many more herders like myself are falling over due to the drouth. I'd trade all the medicine that he's prescribed for one good rain. Life sure can get dreary in a dry winter as you are passing the middle pole.