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# Physician-Provocateur With TV Dreams



Pam Belluck 6 min September 21, 2010

AUBURN, Me. It probably zipped right by most viewers of “House, M.D.”: two brief flashes of doctors on the show reading or carrying a small magazine. But for Dr. Douglas Farrago, it meant something. For 10 years, Dr. Farrago, a family doctor here, has been the majordomo of said publication: an irreverent, intentionally sophomoric, sometimes scatological medical magazine called *Placebo Journal*. And though he is not a “House” fan, the product placement was just one example of Dr. Farrago’s enterprising streak.

Doctoring is “an algorithmic job,” said Dr. Farrago, 45. “You can’t just make up things in medicine: ‘Let’s just try Jell-O.’ So I want to do something creative.”

There was the time at a medical conference he posted an advertisement for “Oxycotton Candy,” parodying the frequently abused drug Oxycontin. Conference organizers “got so mad,” he recalled, that “security said, ‘You have to take it down.’ ” And there were the bumper sticker slogans in Placebo Journal: “My other car was lost in a malpractice suit” and “Maybe Hippocrates was wrong?” Not to mention the magazine’s selection of sexually transmitted disease greeting cards: “Maybe we will date some more, get married and have babies, but until then I think you should know that I have a roaring case of scabies.”

“I pride myself on a lot of the lowbrow stuff,” Dr. Farrago said.

Ten thousand subscribers, he says, pay \$28 a year for Placebo Journal, which is published every two months and skewers the health care system’s half-baked mistakes, pokes fun at doctors, patients, insurers and drug companies, or just goes for the gross-out.

“My audiences are physicians,” Dr. Farrago said. “They see all this stuff. They don’t want to do differential diagnosis and read through complex cases. They just want to take this on the toilet bowl and laugh.”

But if Dr. Farrago and two television producers succeed with their latest project, people could be seeing a different side of him. The producers are pitching a reality show in which Dr. Farrago would parachute into communities around the country and help overstretched family doctors care for patients for several days: sort of a medical “Supernanny.”

“The goal is to take viewers into both of Doug’s lives: the hard-working family practice physician who does everything he can to help his patients get well and stay that way, and the self-described ‘King of Medicine’ who uses his satirical skills to take on a health care system,” according to Bruce Halford, a co-producer with Jeff Mackler.

Dr. Farrago (pronounced fa-RAY-go, like the word meaning

hodgepodge) dreamed of being a professional boxer like his brother Matt until, he said, “I realized I wasn’t that good.”

HOUSE CALL Dr. Doug Farrago, right, with a patient, Tex Strang, in “Tough Medicine.” Credit...Craig Dilger for The New York Times He became a sports medicine trainer working with boxers, but after one of his boxers got pelted with urine-filled bottles while fighting in Mexico, “I kind of knew it was not my thing,” he said, although he has remained close friends with the boxer Lou Savarese. Then, before medical school, Dr. Farrago squatted to work on an electrical outlet, and to ease pain from a blown-out knee, “I put some towels behind my leg,” he said. Voilà, a gizmo was born: the Knee Saver, a foam wedge to cushion one’s crouch.

Thinking it would help baseball catchers, Dr. Farrago obsessively hawked it at spring training and to trainers, many of whom “were really rude,” he said. (One said he would use it to defecate in the woods.) Then he read about the knee surgery of the Cleveland Indians catcher Sandy Alomar Jr. Dr. Farrago sent a Knee Saver to Mr. Alomar’s orthopedic surgeon, and after first being told “he doesn’t like it,” he noticed Mr. Alomar using it during a division series game. It caught on, and was accepted in 2001 into the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Dr. Farrago went on to create a short-lived Web venture to stream university medical talks to doctors, and then, 10 years ago, he started Placebo Journal.

“I guess I was burning out in this job,” he said. “Everybody’s got a monkey on their back, and they want to give you their monkey. They’d leave and feel good, but I’d go home with 25 monkeys.” Fancying itself the Mad magazine of the medical world, Placebo Journal features “True Stories of Medicine” and odd-looking X-rays submitted by doctors, as well as sections like “My Favorite Munchausen,” about patients who invent or exaggerate medical problems. It loves jabbing Big Pharma and insurers; in 2005 Cigna HealthCare complained to Dr. Farrago’s then-employer, a health system, when he printed a physician survey from the fictitious SickNa HealthCare, its logo like Cigna’s tree, but full of dead leaves.

Doctors and patients are fair game, too. A full-page movie ad reads: “He smokes. He drinks too much. He never stops eating. He rarely gets off the couch. He is The American Patient.”

A doctor’s want ad seeks “a corrupt pharmacologist,” able to “create and mass-produce tablets made of useless and harmless compounds, and be willing to sell them labeled as narcotics and/or fibromyalgia treatments.”

And in a parody of opponents of Gardasil, the vaccine given to girls to prevent the sexually transmitted human papillomavirus, Placebo Journal advertises “Godasil the first and only faith-based vaccine,” which “uses a higher power to bring about immunity for your little girl.”

“It’s sophomoric, it’s black, it’s dark,” said Dr. Marc Grobman, an internist in Wilmington, Del., who displays the fake ads in his drug sample cabinet. One favorite: an ad for Sexapro, which erases sex drive. He has submitted several anecdotes of “silly things patients say,” including the woman “who thought she had gotten diverticulitis after being stuck by the needles of a Christmas tree.” Dr. Theresa Langdon, a family practitioner in Portland, Ore., collects every installment, calling it an “adult medicine comic book” (her husband tracked down the debut issue for her birthday). “I balance it out by reading The New England Journal compulsively,” she said.

Nonetheless, not every doctor loves it, she said, adding, “I could see where someone could be offended.” She also finds it “a little horrifying” that her teenage son reads it. “He thinks it’s funny and a little forbidden,” she said. Still, “it’s better than Hustler.” BEST MEDICINE Placebo Journal fancies itself the Mad Magazine of the medical world.



Dr. Farrago also does Placebo Television, a fake Web newscast with him playing often-ludicrous parts, donning wigs and facial hair.

When producers suggested the reality show, having seen Dr. Farrago on YouTube, he set ground rules. His home life, including his wife and three children, was off limits. "As big as my ego is," he said, "I don't want to put my family at risk."

Eager to highlight family practitioners, he resisted suggestions that he "go in like the Dog Whisperer and fix something in three minutes" because "that's not really family medicine" and a doctor should not "one-up another physician."

And when the executive of another hit show said, "How about if he drives around and treats people in his van?," we said no," Dr. Farrago said. "Who does that? What'll I do, start IV insulin and then move on?"

In the demo, shot last winter in Milo, an old Maine mill town, Dr. Farrago saw patients of the only doctor there, Dr. Kathleen Thibault. He visited Danielle Pilon, raising four children, including twins with respiratory problems, and informed Dr. Thibault that Ms. Pilon was smoking and that her home had some safety hazards. He trekked two hours to Mexico, Me., to see Bill Johnston, a firefighter who was experiencing residual problems from an injury caused when a roof fell on him. Producers subsequently filmed him examining Mr. Johnston at Dr. Thibault's office, and asked Dr. Farrago to pretend they had not met so the home visit would appear to come later.

"That's like acting, and I'm not entirely comfortable with it," said Dr. Farrago, but he attempted to comply.

With patients, he displays none of Placebo Journal's smart-alecky tone. He is unvarnished and direct.

"How are you possibly surviving financially?" he asked one of his own patients, Mark Verrill, an unemployed electrician's apprentice getting a checkup soon after his mother's death. "Not working, mother died. Honestly, through all this, other stuff aside, depression?"

After Mr. Verrill left, Dr. Farrago said he was concerned and would check up on him. "His monkey's now on my back." As for the reality show, which was initially called "Doc Holiday" but after the first round of pitching was retooled and renamed "Tough Medicine," he is philosophical.

"I'm not so blind that I'm going to leave my practice to take meetings in Hollywood," he said. "If the TV show works, great. If not, I'll survive. I'll think of something else."