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The cult of celebrity doctors

Our obsession with media-anointed physicians has its pitfalls. A standardized approach to medicine and a focus on "feel-good" topics are among them.

By Marni Jameson, Special to the Los Angeles Times

June 14, 2010

Want to look and feel younger? Click on Dr. Oz's website. Seeking an alternative treatment to what ails you? Visit Andrew Weil's daily blog. Aren't sure whether it's OK to spank your kid? Ask Dr. Phil.

Society has revered famous physicians for years, swallowing their directives like vitamins. Dr. Benjamin Spock helped parents raise a generation. Surgeon General C. Everett Koop pushed the nation to kick, or at least curb, its smoking habit. Ruth Westheimer, a.k.a. "Dr. Ruth," encouraged us to talk about sex without squirming. Even fictional TV doctors, like Dr. Marcus Welby, held significant sway in the 1970s by suggesting to audiences what the practice of medicine should be.

But none of that faith compares to our culture's current obsession with celebrity doctors.

Fame alone seems enough to make many Americans trust their health and relationships to men and women they've never met.

Unlike just a decade ago, when television and books were the only way these media doctors reached us, we now have multiple channels of media serving them up — there's no avoiding them. And our growing appetite for health and wellness information fuels our addiction to their advice

"The impact of social media on the presence of these doctors in our lives is the single biggest difference between celebrity doctors today and those of the past," says Lisa Gualtieri, professor of online consumer health and Web strategies for healthcare at Tufts University School of Medicine.

"If you don't watch television, their information will hit you on the Internet, on Twitter or Facebook, or when you walk in a bookstore. The most successful ones have mastered multiple media channels," she said.

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Today's celebrity docs not only tweet and blog, they also have Facebook fan pages, websites and bestselling books. Some have their own TV and radio shows, regular magazine columns and companies that sell products they promote. Oh, and most still practice medicine.

Would-be patients trust them because, well, because they're celebrities.

One size fits all

Seeking celebrity advice is not a health habit most doctors would recommend.

"If people have seen these doctors on television, they don't really care about their credentials; they assume they wouldn't be on TV unless they'd been screened and given the network stamp of approval," says Dr. Tom Linden, a psychiatrist and former broadcast journalist who is now a professor of medical and science journalism at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

"We project onto these celebrities traits, wisdom and other abilities that they may or may not have," Linden says.

Yet the reliance on media-savvy medical gurus is understandable, in a way.

The cost of going to the doctor, the limited time patients get for visits and the increasingly restricted access to specialists have combined to push people away from their doctor's office and toward the Internet and its panel of celebrity experts, said David Halle, professor of sociology at UCLA.

"The risk is that these celebrity doctors deliver one-size-fits-all medicine."

Linden says today's celebrity doctors can be divided into two broad categories: medical journalists and medical showmen.

"The journalists operate under journalistic principles," he says. "The others operate outside the sphere of journalism and are in the world of informational entertainment."

Big personalities

As for what makes a celebrity doctor of any stripe, Gualtieri says it takes more than telegenic good looks and amazing credentials. Plenty of physicians have those.

The ones who break through have something special, she says. Working with her graduate students, Gualtieri conducted informal studies on what makes some doctors achieve a strong media presence while others equally well credentialed don't.

"The ones on top are good at multimedia, so have a big Internet presence and a big personality." They also have the desire and drive to achieve celebrity.

On top of that, they deliver information on topics that a lot of people care about — how to live better longer, stay young, be thinner, have happier love lives. "We latch on to what they say because they have figured out how to capitalize on what we want to hear," she said.

But Linden adds that consumers aren't as aware as they should be of the divide between news and entertainment shows.

"When information appears on major news media, it is reasonable to assume that the information has been vetted to a much higher degree than if it appears on a TV talk show or a reality show. Yet people assume the two carry equal weight. Being on 'Oprah' or 'Larry King Live' is not a stamp of approval for medical or psychological legitimacy. They're not news shows. They're entertainment."

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