DOCTOR MYTH SERIES: Paging the doctor on the green

Written by Mark Cardwell on March 8, 2012 for The Medical Post

Golfing on Wednesdays is an enduring doctor myth. But is there anything to this tony mid-week jaunt?

As public perceptions of physicians go, playing golf—especially on Wednesday afternoons—is perhaps one of the most enduring. Think back to the popular TV show *M*A*S*H*: Fictional MDs Hawkeye and B.J. were regularly seen with clubs slung over their shoulders, and often golfed with martinis in hand while philosophizing about life and war.

More recently, the physician misanthrope Dr. Gregory House, of the popular program House, hobbled around on a cane and used drugs to treat the pain in his injured leg. Where did the doctor suffer the infarction in his thigh? On the golf course, naturally.

Doctors and teeing up pair so well, *Golf Digest* even ranked America’s top 100 golfer-doctors, because, the editors noted, “When they’re not busy saving lives, doctors love to play golf.”

Though one of the ranked doctors tried to bust the myth, arguing that his peers don’t play golf more than other professionals, another golfing pediatric urologist admitted he daydreams about the game so much, he refers to his surgical instruments as golf clubs.

Wars and golf nerves
Fact or fiction, the Wednesday golfing-doctor myth may be traced back to the U.S. on Nov. 14, 1916—a week after one of the closest presidential elections in American history. In the midst of the First World War, when public opinion in the still-neutral U.S. was divided over keeping out of the European-based conflict or entering it, the press was rife with rumours that the hard-fought campaign and nail-biting win had taken a toll on President Woodrow Wilson’s mental and physical health.

On Nov. 14, a story appeared in the venerable New York Times that put those fears to rest: The headline read, "Dr. Grayson Vouches for Wilson’s ‘Nerves’: President Played Best Game of Golf Wednesday When the Election Seemed Lost.”

Dr. Cary Grayson, the White House physician, recounted Wilson’s prowess on the golf course the day after the election. "If you want to know about his nerves," Dr. Grayson said, "I will give you something to judge by. I played golf with the president Wednesday. . . . He played the best game I ever saw him play. I usually beat him, but he beat me Wednesday. His putting, the real test of golf nerves, was as good as or better than usual. That is how much nerves showed on him.”

So the doctor—and the president—golfed on Wednesday.

In Canada, the genesis of the myth hovers around the Second World War, when doctors apparently hit the green mid-week. "Wednesdays were known as Doctors Day,” the late Dr. Ian Hutchison recalled in a story on doctors who golf, which appeared in the Medical Post in 2008.

Dr. Hutchison, then a retired internal medicine specialist and a third-generation member of the Royal Montreal Golf Club, used to caddy for his physician father in the 1940s, when physicians made up a big part of the venerable golf and country club’s membership. "There were always four or five foursomes of doctors.”

Golf game? Take a Mulligan!

So if the golfing-on-Wednesday notion was firmly established by the Second World War, something changed by the 1950s. According to Dr. Hutchison, who died last December, the number of physicians at the club began to dwindle after the war. He blamed the decline on several factors, from the cost of memberships and heavy work schedules to the non-athletic background of many top academic students and the feminization of the medical profession.

"My observation of new doctors is that, unless they’re jocks, they’re not into golfing,” Dr. Hutchison said.

Indeed, it seems the tradition—if there ever was one—has continued to fall away among younger doctors. Despite the popular notion that doctors wile hours away each week on the golf course, today’s physicians say they hardly have time to see patients—let alone spend a Wednesday afternoon putting.

Dr. Benjamin Barankin, a dermatologist in Toronto, put it this way: “I hardly golf since life is too busy between practice and family.”

Apart from physicians who may be slowing down their practices as they approach retirement, Dr. Barankin says he doesn’t know of any doctors who can free up time during the work week to golf. “Certainly for the younger generation, Wednesday afternoon golf would be highly unusual.”

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Beyond the time constraints, there are other reasons golfing doctors may be more relic than reality: Even if they had a day off, many of today’s doctors wouldn’t spend it on the green.

"With the feminization of the profession,” says Dr. Rhonda Church, a family physician in Bridgewater, N.S.,"I vote that it’s time to shake things up and look at other options for bringing physicians together. Wine-tasting and a spa day, anyone?”
Dr. Church may be an award-winner at medical conference golf tournaments—albeit for hitting the most sand traps and trees and, once, for being the Worst Dressed Golfer—but she and many of her female colleagues “share a collective eye roll when the inevitable medical golf tournament rears its head.”

**Not on Wednesdays . . .**

Still, some older physicians report keeping the tattered myth alive by getting outside during the week as their schedules wind down. Wednesdays, however, aren’t an option.

Dr. Bill Stanish, a Halifax orthopedic surgeon and sports medicine specialist who putts with physician friends, told the *Medical Post*, “In April we’ll fire e-mails around saying something like, ‘What day are we going to pick to tee it up this year?’ If we do pick a day it’s usually toward the end of the week, like Thursday or Friday, when schedules are less hectic.”

In fact, though this golfer is aware of the myth about his peers, Dr. Stanish says he has never seen nor heard of doctors actually putting on Wednesdays in the five decades he has been practising medicine — and playing golf. “Maybe it was true years ago (but) it’s not something from my generation or the younger generation of doctors.”

For Dr. Stanish, the driving force behind picking a tee time is as much about with whom as when you play. “You always want to play with kindred spirits,” says Dr. Stanish, a five-handicap player. “Kibitzing is half the fun.”

Other physicians who golf say there are other equally important reasons to find time to get outside. “Playing golf is the best way I know to unwind after a hard day,” says Dr. Pierre Boutet, an emergency care physician at a small regional hospital in the Quebec City area and a member at the nearby Le Grand Vallon golf course.

The son of a golf-loving pathologist, Dr. Boutet took up the game with a passion as a teenager and says he is now one of a handful of doctors at his club—but he doesn’t work or play with any of them.

After all, the green is the one place where he can block out mental clutter from the office. “It helps me to stay focused and get refreshed in the outdoors,” he says. “Any day is good for me.”

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