The practice of medicine is basically a private affair. When the exam room door closes, it is just patient and doctor tackling problems. Although operating rooms have lots of people in them, when scalpel hits skin, it’s once again doctor and patient. The doctor-patient relationship is a special form of secrecy. And when a public person is the patient, that is challenged. Caring for celebrity patients can be difficult. Aside from keeping clinical details away from public scrutiny, physicians may be asked to provide them with special access or unusual favors. Keeping the connection professional means insisting on strict clinical boundaries.

How much of a famous person’s medical history to divulge has been a particularly treacherous balancing act for physicians who care for U.S. presidents as they juggle the public’s “right to know” with the privacy of the individual holding the highest office in the country. As Abraham Lincoln lay dying of an assassin’s bullet, scant press releases told a waiting country only that his wounds were “mortal.” Frequent newspaper accounts following the shooting of James Garfield, the next president to be assassinated, kept Americans posted on his vacillating health.

The era of politically motivated nondisclosure of presidential illness began with Woodrow Wilson’s debilitating stroke. Although it essentially prevented Wilson from performing the duties of president, the true extent of his dysfunction was concealed by his wife. FDR’s paralysis was hidden behind podiums and a remarkable feat of assisted walking. And details of JFK’s struggles with chronic back pain and Addison’s disease were successfully suppressed during his presidency. Presidents and other famous individuals have a public persona to maintain and illness that might tarnish that image is sometimes seen as a liability.

The physicians who care for presidents have mostly lingered in the background, surfacing only for press conferences to explain the details of their patient’s illness. One exception was Dennis O’Leary, MD, who was the articulate spokesman for George Washington Medical Center during Ronald Reagan’s hospitalization for his gunshot wound. For a few weeks in 1981, O’Leary’s name became a household word. Mayo Clinic’s Ronald Petersen, who treated Reagan toward the end of his life, stepped into the spotlight only when Nancy Reagan asked him to do so.

Past eras have seen surgeons such as Michael DeBakey and Christiaan Barnard propelled into the spotlight by their scientific achievements. Today, doctors such as Sanjay Gupta and Mehmet Oz seek it out as they communicate a Tinseltown version of medical news that entertains more than educates. More often, however, doctors are happy to keep a low profile. That’s true for Minnesota physicians Ray Christensen, Jon Hallberg, David Hilden and others, who via TV and radio bring articulate, informative discussions of medical topics to the public.

Whether it’s famous doctors or patients, celebrity can snatch medical issues from the privacy of doctor talking to patient and publicize them, changing the role of doctor and patient.

I had my first brush with a celebrity patient in the early 1990s just after the first World Trade Center bombing. I saw actor Walter Matthau for a physical examination. A few days later, my receptionist told me that somebody on the phone wanted to question me in regard to the bombing. It was Matthau looking for the results of his lab work. Although treating celebrities may have its challenges, it certainly can be entertaining.

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