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PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

To be a lawyer or a doctor? That is the question

BY MARCEL STRIGBERGER ([HTTPS://WWW.ABAJOURNAL.COM/AUTHORS/64798/](https://www.abajournal.com/authors/64798/))

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Marcel Strigberger.

Albert Einstein said, “Try not to become a man of success but rather try to become a man of value.” So you want to become a doctor or a lawyer? For some reason or other, these two words are often muttered together, like St. Paul and Minneapolis. Or like Dallas and Fort Worth. Or like Tweedledum and Tweedledee. Do these professions generate similar value to society?

My parents always wanted me to pursue one vocation or the other. In fact, they made it seem like these were the only professions in existence. Growing up was like living in a world of Baskin-Robbins but only ever coming across vanilla and chocolate.

Actually, my first career preference as a kid was to become a streetcar or trolley operator. But as the Montreal Transportation Commission phased out all trams by the early 1960s, this option was out, unless I would have considered moving to San Francisco.

This left law or medicine. As I was squeamish and could not stomach the medical care environment, this left law.

But of the two professions, although I think that lawyers provide as much value as

physicians, I have concluded that doctors are accorded greater esteem than lawyers are, at least on a crisis per capita basis. You would never dial 911 to get a lawyer. True, if you get arrested or your spouse slaps you with a summons seeking 110% of your net worth, you'd rather call a lawyer—unless the initial shock gives you a heart attack.

Furthermore, the reverence that doctors get is frequently accompanied by some perks. I have heard often enough how physicians let the airlines know that they're doctors, and that they would be ready for emergency duty, especially if upgraded no charge from economy to business class. I tried this ploy once, telling the check-in clerk I was a lawyer ready to help out in an emergency situation, suggesting that I get a complimentary business class accommodation. She replied, "If you're a lawyer, you should be well able to afford business class." OK, I tried.

I once flew overseas when a flight attendant accidentally spilled some hot coffee on a passenger. After the scream, an announcement came over requesting the assistance of any doctor. In 15 seconds, the lady had three doctors and a nurse at her side. I felt like helping too, but what could I possibly have done? Offer to draw up her will?

Lawyers actually face more undeserved criticism as we try to diligently ply our profession. One of the most common questions we get is, "How can you represent a client knowing he is guilty?"

Doctors on the other hand are expected to treat that same criminal no problem. After all, physicians take that Hippocratic Oath. Suggestion: Maybe we should also come up with a comparable oath, thereby allowing us to represent the vilest of criminals without making us look like we are in concert with the likes of Joseph Stalin.

Maybe rather than Greek, we can come up with some Roman name. Then when asked that question by the public, we can simply shrug our shoulders and say, "Hey, we have to. It's the Claudius Oath." The questioner would no doubt understand and say, "Of course. Lawyers are honorable and conscientious."

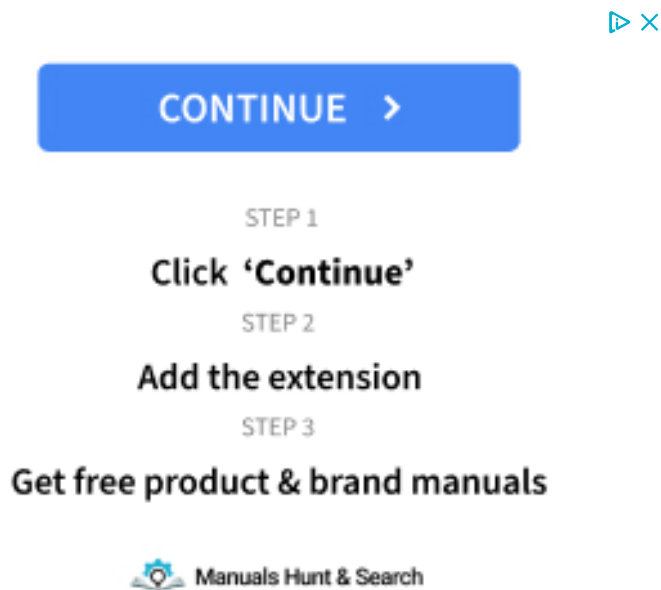
Doctors must really be proud of themselves, of their relevance and importance at all times and places. However, I am talking of medical doctors, of course. Not PhDs or other kinds of Ds. Although these latter people can perhaps also be proud of themselves, they are a little more expendable in society.

Say if someone was to slip on some ice cream on the floor of a Häagen-Dazs outlet and the cry of, "Is there a doctor around?" went out, it would not help if someone like Dr. Ruth ran over and tried to comfort the injured victim saying to him, "Lie still, and don't get aroused. By the way, did you know an ice cream cone is a phallic symbol?" (Ditto if it was a Baskin-Robbins.)

The word "doctor" has become synonymous with the concept that if you bring your

problems here, the doctor will fix them. Hence, a perusal through the local telephone directory finds a sprinkling of the metaphor in the form of “Dr. Pipes,” “Dr. Roof” and “Dr. Deli,” among others.

Aren’t these guys about the first you would call on if you needed help fixing your pipes, your roof or your pastrami sandwich?



The image shows a blue button with the text "CONTINUE" and a right-pointing chevron. Below it is a three-step process:

- STEP 1: Click 'Continue'
- STEP 2: Add the extension
- STEP 3: Get free product & brand manuals

At the bottom of the process is the logo for "Manuals Hunt & Search", which features a magnifying glass icon over a book.

This nomenclature would not work for these lawyers. I doubt that a mob would beat a path to these aforementioned tradespeople were they to be called something like “Henderson, Findlay, Rosenberg and Roofers.”

At least we lawyers are more gracious, willing to share the glory of a great legal case with our clients. For example, any landmark case is remembered not by the lawyer but by the name of the key players. The rule in the M’Naghten case, which deals with the century-old plea of insanity, is named after Daniel M’Naghten. He killed someone and got away with it when his brilliant lawyer saved him from the hangman by propounding the principle of not guilty by reason of insanity.

Same deal with the rule in *Hedley Byrne*, which allowed economic loss damages caused by negligent statements, or *Miranda* (<https://www.abajournal.com/gallery/miranda>), dealing with rights upon being arrested (https://www.abajournal.com/news/article/podcast_monthly_episode_75).

Doctors, on the other hand, hog all the glory. The diseases are frequently named after the name of the physician who discovered a treatment. I am thinking of Crohn’s disease, Parkinson’s disease, Alzheimer’s disease, Hodgkin’s disease, to name a few. Even “salmonella” was named after Dr. Daniel E. Salmon. And he wasn’t even a typical doctor like the aforementioned; Salmon actually worked for the U.S. Department of Agriculture. He was a veterinarian. Salmon too hogged the glory.

(Pun unapologetically intended.)

You never hear about the unfortunate patient at all. Well, maybe one. But I don't think the poor sufferer was glorified by doctors calling the disease "Elephant Man disease."

At least we lawyers humanize the process. We share the glory with the clients. The case isn't simply "Bed B." We do care. How's that for providing value? Of these binary professions, I am happy and proud to say I chose the right one.

See also:

"The curious case of why lawyers are not called 'doctor'" (<https://www.abajournal.com/voice/article/the-curious-case-of-why-lawyers-are-not-called-dr>)

*Marcel Strigberger, after 40-plus years of practicing civil litigation in the Toronto area, closed his law office and decided to continue to pursue his humor writing and speaking passions. His just-launched book is *Boomers, Zoomers and Other Oomers: A Boomer-biased Irreverent Perspective on Aging* (<https://marcelshumour.com/books>). For more information, visit [Marcelshumour.com](https://marcelshumour.com) and follow him at [@Marcelshumour](https://twitter.com/Marcelshumour) on X, formerly known as Twitter.*

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