



The More Things Change...



By James Affleck, MD

*"Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose."
- Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr*

It was 1936 and I was 5 years-old. I was a bystander at a conversation where my grandfather told my father that medicine was going to hell. My grandfather had come to Sacramento in the early 20s and hung out his shingle on his home on 21st Street. It struck me that medicine must not have been worse than the tales he told me of practice in Utah where he was paid for medical treatment with a chicken (tax free?). He died at age 72 of a stroke suffered while making a house call at midnight.

My father was a pharmacist, and as a young graduate, founded Affleck's Pharmacy in 1921. He provided "Prescriptions Exclusively" - no greeting cards or cosmetics for him. He did, however, sell CP (chemically pure) grade chemicals to students for their chemistry sets.

All went well until the 40s when pharmaceutical companies started manufacturing compressed tablets and sealed capsules. There went the "art of pharmacy" and pharmacists suddenly became mere "pill counters." Now, pharmacy was going to hell. Fortunately he did not live to witness the present era when all community pharmacies have been economically forced to close and sell their prescription lists to the Rite-Aids and Safeways.

My return to Sacramento was in 1962, and everything seemed fine to me. We are now said to have practiced in the "golden era" and, indeed, within 20-30 years, governmental agencies and health insurers were imposing prior authorization and drug formularies, and I was becoming totally frustrated.

But what about those fresh, young MDs entering practice? They seemed to have no problem accommodating to these intrusions. Everything looked fine as they had had no other experience. And thus starts another cycle.

When we began contacting former _____ employees about the memorial project, this is what we heard, again and again: "It was the best job I ever had!"

My son is a hospital pharmacist: a scientist dealing with pharmacokinetics, pharmacodynamics and pharmacogenomics. He is in his 26th year of practice and at one point was pressured to join a union. He has gone from a clinical pharmacist, working on the floors with physicians, to sitting at a computer all day as a data inputter, to make the hospital network function. His constant complaint is of the emphasis and pressure for cost control at the expense of simple good medical judgment.

And what do the new to practice pharmacists think? Everything's fine.

The more things change, the more they remain the same.

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This 1935 photo shows the Affleck pharmacy and the motorcycle used to deliver drugs. It was located on 10th Street near J Street in downtown Sacramento, to the right of Levinson's book store.

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