

DysAequanimitas

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Performed in staged reading at “Bioethics Across Borders,” annual meeting of ASBH, American Society for Bioethics and Humanities. Montreal, 2003.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

REFEREE	Manager of the show, judge and ringmaster / mistress.
DR. WILLIAM OSLER	Historical character. 19th-20th century. Brought American medicine out of the dark ages, influential in Canada and Britain as well.
DR. BUCKAROO BANZAI	Movie character, 1984, in “The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai: Across the 8th Dimension.” Neurosurgeon, rock star, physicist.
EELIREM RRAK	A bent and twisted woman of uncertain age.

Scene: A prize-fighting ring. REFEREE in the center of the ring.

REFEREE

Welcome, welcome, welcome! To the play-off match for the Championship of Medicine!

The contenders are —

The reigning Champion, Dr. William Osler the Johns Hopkins Professor of Medicine, 1849-1919! The greatest clinician of our times! He set the standard! He wrote the textbook!

(OSLER enters running, like a champion.
Wears white coat.)

And the Challenger, Dr. Buckaroo Banzai, 1984, 20th Century Fox, 103 minutes. Born to an American mother and a Japanese father, he began life as he was destined to live it — in several directions at once! A brilliant neurosurgeon, this restless young man grew dissatisfied with a life devoted solely to medicine. He roamed the planet, studying martial arts and particle physics, with his band of hard-rocking scientists, The Hong Kong Cavaliers!

(BANZAI enters running, cooler, like a challenger. Wears kimono.)

Tonight, the Champion and the Challenger compete in a life-and-death battle of wits to diagnose and cure a PATIENT!

Are you ready, Dr. Osler?

OSLER

No eventuality can disturb the mental equilibrium of the physician.

REFeree
Dr. Banzai? Are you ready?

BANZAI
I got nothing but time.

REFeree
I will now choose from the names in this hat the name of one poor unfortunate soul whose afflictions will test the two contenders tonight. (REFeree closes eyes, reaches into hat and pulls out a slip of paper.) Will Eelirem Rrak please enter the ring? Is Eelirem Rrak in the house?

(A bent and twisted woman of uncertain age hobbles up.)

EELIREM RRAK
Here I am. That's me.

(REFeree helps her up into the ring, and into a chair at the center of the ring.)

REFeree
Tell us your medical problem, Eelirem.

EELIREM RRAK
I have headaches.

REFeree
Headaches!

OSLER
Interesting.

BANZAI
Sounds awful.

REFeree
Headaches! The medical problem for the Championship Match is HEADACHES!

EELIREM RRAK
Can they really help me?

REFeree
They're the best. If they can't help you — nobody can.

EELIREM RRAK
That doesn't answer my question.

REFEREE

The contenders will flip a coin to see who gets to ask the first question. (Taking out a coin, flipping it in the air, catching and covering it.) The challenger will call it. Dr. Banzai, heads or tails?

BANZAI

Tails.

REFEREE

It's heads! Dr. Osler, the first question to the patient.

OSLER

(To Eelirem) Headaches. Headaches. Tell me, Eelirem, do you vomit when you have these headaches?

EELIREM RRAK

Vomit? No, I never vomit.

OSLER

Thank you.

EELIREM RRAK

Not when I have a headache, anyway. I used to vomit often as a child /

OSLER

(Interrupting, speaking over her next line.) Thank you. That's all I needed.

EELIREM RRAK

/and one of my cousins still vomits all the time. You asked.

OSLER

If the patient does not vomit with the headaches, then in my experience she is unlikely to have a brain tumor.

REFEREE

No brain tumor!

EELIREM RRAK

I don't have a brain tumor?

OSLER

Unlikely.

EELIREM RRAK

I'm cured of a brain tumor! Oh, thank you, Dr. Osler. No wonder you're the champion.

REFEREE

Dr. Banzai?

BANZAI
Eelirem, could you tell us how often— What would you like us to call you, by the way?

REFEREE
That's a question, Dr. Banzai.

BANZAI
No, that's a courtesy.

REFEREE
It's a question. It counts.

BANZAI
(Upset.) Then at least let the patient answer the question!

OSLER
(Admonishing) Banzai, Banzai, in the physician or surgeon no quality takes rank with imperturbability.

BANZAI
It's an important question.

REFEREE
Answer the question, Eelirem. What would you like us to call you?

EELIREM RRAK
I've never had a doctor ask that question before. Since we're not personal friends, and the doctors go by last names, call me Ms. Rrak.

REFEREE
Ms. Rrak. Well! All right. Dr. Osler, ask your next question.

OSLER
Do you have chills and fever?

EELIREM RRAK
No.

OSLER
Then her headaches are not due to meningitis.

REFEREE
Not meningitis!

EELIREM RRAK
I'm cured of meningitis, too? That's a load off. When Osler walks into a room, the moment he gives you is yours. Hardly ever more than a moment, but there is curiously no abrupt beginning or end to it. One cannot luxuriate into reminiscences in his company; expansions about family and friends are not for him—that the nurse has to bear. I think he is always a little sorry for the nurse.

REFEREE

Dr. Banzai?

BANZAI

Ms. Rrak, could you tell us about the history of these headaches? That means how often you get them, how long they last, and how long ago they first began.

EELIREM RRAK

They come about, once or twice a week, and they last all day. I have to go to bed when I have a headache. I had one yesterday. I don't have one today.

REFEREE

Dr. Osler?

BANZAI

Just a moment. She hasn't completed her answer. You haven't told us when they first started.

EELIREM RRAK

It's hard to remember. A few years ago.

BANZAI

Mm hmm. Only a few years ago. Thank you.

REFEREE

Dr. Osler?

OSLER

Recurrent headaches without vomiting or fever. In a woman. If this patient comes from a neurotic family, then certain kinds of headaches are more likely. However, one gets nowhere asking the general run of humanity such a question, because they seldom comprehend the neurosis of their own family. Therefore I will ask you instead: Ms. Rrak, do any of your family members have headaches?

EELIREM RRAK

Yes. There's my mother, and my aunt. And my brother used to have headaches until he moved away.

OSLER

Clearly neurotic. I have a diagnosis to propose!

REFEREE

For the continuing Championship of Medicine, Dr. Osler, what is your diagnosis?

OSLER

Migraine headache!

REFEREE

And your treatment?

OSLER

During the paroxysm the patient should be kept in bed and absolutely quiet. Avoidance of excitement, regularity of meals and moderation of diet are important rules. In children much may be done by watching the diet of the child. On no account should such children be allowed to compete in school for prizes.

Not too much, however, should be expected of the preventive treatment of migraine. It must be confessed that in a large proportion of the cases the headaches recur in spite of all we can do. Caffeine and ergot have been recommended. Cannabis indica is probably the most satisfactory remedy.

REFEREE

Your diagnosis is INCORRECT!

OSLER

(Breath. Clenching:) Even under the most serious circumstances, the physician or surgeon who shows in his face the slightest alteration has not his medullary centers under the highest control, and is liable to disaster at any moment. I have educated my nerve centers.

REFEREE

Dr. Banzai, it is your question.

BANZAI

(To OSLER:) I have been educated by my nerve centers.

(To MS. RRAK:) Ms. Rrak — how's your life with these headaches?

EELIREM RRAK

My life?

BANZAI

Yeah. (To REFEREE:) May I restate the question for the patient?

REFEREE

You may.

BANZAI

(To MS. RRAK:) Yeah. How's your life? Whatever's causing these headaches, they can't be fun to live with. What's the worst thing about living with these headaches?

EELIREM RRAK

Well, I don't so much mind the pain. The worst part is that I can't keep busy when I have a headache, I have to lie down, and I can't keep busy. I keep busy to — When I can't keep busy I think about, I can't stop thinking about — I keep busy so I won't have to think about the accident.

OSLER

I have a diagnosis to propose!!!

REFEREE

Eh? Oh. Oh! To retain the Championship of Medicine, Dr. Osler, what is your diagnosis?

OSLER

Railway brain!

Also known as railway spine, the condition follows an accident—such as Ms. Rrak sustained—often in a railway train, in which injury has occurred, or shock or concussion. In railway cases, so long as litigation is pending and the patient is in the hands of lawyers the symptoms usually persist.

EELIREM RRAK

But—

REFEREE

Your diagnosis is INCORRECT!!!

OSLER

Incorrect? But—

BANZAI

Losing your grip on those medullary centers, Dr. Osler?

OSLER

(Biting out the words:) Imperturbability means, my dear colleague, presence of mind under all circumstances, calmness amid storm, immobility. It is the quality which is most appreciated by the laity and most often misunderstood by them. This quality is liable to be misinterpreted, and the general accusation of hardness, so often brought against the profession, has here its foundation.

The physician who betrays indecision and worry, who lacks this precious quality, loses rapidly the confidence of his patients.

EELIREM RRAK

—but I wasn't in any accident—

BANZAI

I know your imperturbability, and I chose cool instead.

OSLER

As imperturbability is largely a bodily endowment, I regret to say that there are those who, owing to congenital defects, may never be able to acquire it. Keen sensibility is doubtless a virtue of high order — when it does not interfere with steadiness of hand or coolness of nerve — but for the practitioner, a callousness which thinks only of the good to be effected is the preferable quality.

EELIREM RRAK

But, Dr. Banzai, I wasn't in any accident . . .

BANZAI

(To her:) I know. (To OSLER:) No, my dear colleague. Cool is perturbable. Cool rocks with the patient as the patient is rocked. And cool rolls on. Cool is with the patient. I will not practice unperturbed by what I see.

OSLER

Whose question is it?

REFEREE

Oh! Yours.

OSLER

What do you mean you weren't in any accident?

BANZAI

(To OSLER:) Nononononono, don't tug on that, you never know what it might be attached to.

EELIREM RRAK

I was at home. I was at home that day. He was in the accident.

BANZAI

(To OSLER:) I warned you.

OSLER

He— ?

EELIREM RRAK

My son. My son was in an accident. I didn't used to have headaches. I didn't used to have to keep so busy.

BANZAI

I'm afraid I have a diagnosis to propose.

OSLER

Traumatic hysteria.

BANZAI

I'd call it a grief reaction, but you can call it what you want. When you get right down to it, this far inside the head, it all looks the same.

OSLER

I'm more comfortable with my terminology. Traumatic hysteria. We can treat this. A trip abroad, with a month or two in Switzerland, will usually prove sufficient. The excitement of the large cities abroad should be avoided. Better still, for these cases, is a life in the woods. Three months of tent-life in the Adirondacks or the same length of time in the Rocky Mountains will sometimes cure the most marked cases. Such a plan is not, however, within the circumstances of all.

BANZAI

Yeah.

REFEREE

Hey! We have a new champion! (Seizing BANZAI's hand and raising it up.) Hey, hey!
Dr. Buckaroo Banzai, Champion of Medicine!

(ALL applaud the new champ.)

EELIREM RRAK

(Stands and addresses audience.) I have an epilogue for you. And they all lived happily ever after, teaching new generations of doctors to rock and roll with their patients.

No.

The new champion gave a few years of medical graduates permission to be cool in practice. People liked it. But cool looked too easy. The careful art of cool didn't look like work. So the bean-counters wouldn't give beans for being cool. You can't buy beans without beans.

Imperturbability wasn't fun. It looked like work. Bean-counters paid through the nose for imperturbability. Young doctors needed beans, so they gave up cool.

Buckaroo Banzai retired from neurosurgery a few years later to race competitive espresso carts. The End.

BANZAI

One more thing. Our author has a query. You see, I, Buckaroo Banzai, am a copyrighted character. Copyrighted by someone else. Probably by someone in 20th Century Fox, which made the movie; or MGM/UA, which released the DVD; or maybe by the yahoo that wrote me in the first place, Earl Mac Rauch, whoever he is. Someone else owns me, body and soul, lock, stock and barrel. Our little play cannot see the public light of day with me in it. Our author, who is Eelirem Rrak spelled backwards, would like to know if you can suggest a disguise for me. Is there another medical icon, preferably a cool medical icon, in the public domain? Please let her know; she would be very grateful. So would I.

THE END

Osler's and Banzai's lines quoted from:

"The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai: Across the 8th Dimension." 1984, 20th Century Fox. Written by Earl Mac Rauch. Directed by W.D. Richter. Starring Peter Weller, John Lithgow, Ellen Barkin, Jeff Goldblum, Christopher Lloyd.

The Principles and Practice of Medicine, 1892, William Osler. pp. 957, 959, 967 ff., 984.

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("Aequanimitas")