Health & Medicine

Paging Dr. Bard

A 275-year-old physician has a prescription for the ages.

By
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Illustration by Andy Ward

One afternoon this past July, in the men’s room on lower level 2 of the Hammer Health Sciences Building, on the Columbia University Medical Center campus, a man in knee-high riding boots, a brass-button-studded blue Colonial coat, white breeches, and a white cravat, stood affixing his wig. In the enlightened and tolerant environs of the College of Physicians and Surgeons, he attracted remarkably little attention.

The man in Colonial attire, who could be heard complaining about his “itchy hairpiece,” was Ron Cohen ’81PS, founder and CEO of Acorda Therapeutics, a biotech company that develops therapies for people with neurological disorders. Cohen is also a veteran thespian and a former member of P&S’s Bard Hall Players, the preeminent medical-school theater company in the country.

Today, however, Cohen was not on his way to a performance of *The Crucible*, the show that recently capped off the company’s fiftieth-anniversary season, but to the CUMC video studio. Here he would recite an excerpt from Samuel Bard’s “A Discourse upon the Duties of a Physician,” which was delivered at the King’s College Commencement on May 16, 1769 — the day on which the University’s first medical degrees were conferred. The videotaped dramatic monologue was slated to entertain faculty and students at a reception following Dean Lee Goldman’s 250th-anniversary “state of the medical school” address later in the year.

Bard, personal physician to George Washington, was the founder of the medical school at King’s College — the first in the American colonies to grant a medical degree.

“Be not alarmed, if I set out in telling you, that your Labours must have no End. No less than Life, and its greatest Blessing Health, are to be the Objects of your Attention; and would you acquit yourselves to your own Consciences, you must spend your Days in assiduous Enquiries, after the Means of rendering those of others long and happy,” Bard/Cohen declaimed. “There is nothing by which a Man approaches nearer to the Perfections of the Deity than by restoring the Sick to the Enjoyment of the Blessings of Health.”

Later, as Cohen reflected on the speech, he marveled at how Bard’s sentiments on a doctor’s duty still resonate in the twenty-first century. “To provide patients with the best care, today’s physicians have to keep up with a swelling store of medical knowledge and insurance rigmarole and still stay solvent. The task is no less

daunting for those who, like me, work to develop new therapies and seek regulatory approval for them," he said. "And still the practice of medicine remains an honor and a privilege."

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