



Smoke signals and carrier pigeons

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The following is a fairy tale of a distant era, which could not conceivably happen in the modern age of reason. But if it did, how would you defend the interests of your rural patients?

Once upon a time in a remote kingdom named Ontario, there was a town that shall remain unnamed, except to say that it lay on the shores of Lake Temiskaming. Farmers would tend the fertile fields, woodcutters the woods, miners the depths of the earth and shopkeepers the shops. There was even a shrine of the Tim of Horton where many drank the waters.

The healers of the town had an infirmary, which was built on an outcropping of limestone that overlooked the valley patchwork of farms. There the sick would lie, and the quick would attend to be bled and their phlegm be inspected by the sombre wizards and witches of the laboratories.

That actually is an embellishment. There was only one laboratory of that type in the town, and its denizens were cheerful (even under the light of the moon), but that mattered little. It was good and reliable (except in the divination of the tricky D-dimer, for which the healers of the town felt that other oracles that they consulted might be usually of better assistance, unless the matter was of sufficient uncertainty).

One day it came to pass that a decree came from the court of Queen's Park requiring divination of outpatient

phlegm and blood be done, not by the local coven, but far afield by the Merchants of Matters Laboratory.

Great consternation befell the little group of healers. They had become accustomed to timely reports and were dismayed that what had been an efficient and safe practice would now require a day's journey by stage coach to the kingdom's capital. "Nay, nay," said the court official who came to consult. "Reporting would occur as quickly as possible by smoke signal." Despite or because of the thickness of the smoke, the official in the end had no power to do anything but implement the decision, no matter how unwise or ill-advised. The disheartened healers had to take it.

And then the feared happened. A bleeding that was to be analyzed on a Friday took not 1, not 2, but 5 days for the divination of a "critical" condition of imminent renal demise to be told. The patient in whom the renals were demising had the good sense to present to the healers before their passing, which was averted by the art.

The ire of the healers rose again. They made urgent supplications to the Merchants of Matters Laboratory at the kingdom's capital. Eventually, the boon of having divinations of "critical" conditions delivered by carrier pigeons to the infirmary at all hours was granted. A small victory, too thin on the bone to provide much nourishment, but a victory nonetheless.