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THE MEDICAL REVIEW

by Marc Siegel, M.D.

Marcus Welby, M.D.

This show made me a better doctor

QUESTION: WHAT EVER HAPPENED TO MARCUS

WELBY? **ANSWER:** MANAGED CARE.

THE WELBY TV SHOW RERUNS HAVE FADED FROM THE MAJOR NETWORKS, AND NOW THIS OLD MEDICAL

series is rarely seen. It's no wonder that TV has deleted Welby for being out-of-date, especially when you compare today's disease-driven time-limited physicians with the hand-holders of yesteryear.

Marcus Welby, M.D., a popular drama set in Middle America, ran from 1969 to 1976 on ABC. James Brolin as Steve Kiley was a young motorcycle-riding general practitioner. Robert Young as his mentor was a study in bedside manner. The creased brow of concern, the empathetic pat on the patient's shoulder—these Welby trademarks delivered the message that a family doctor could guide a patient caringly through life's crises.

The show looked at serious illnesses from unexplained kidney ailments to deafness to alcoholism. In what was perhaps its greatest episode, Peter Duel played a suicidal Native American who hadn't met family expectations that he become a doctor. Welby, not knowing how to keep him from jumping off a roof, said in an exasperated moment that showed his great humanity, "What can I say to you?"

Despite these attempts at realism, critics lambasted what they considered an overly sentimental approach to doctoring. Unlike current shows such as *ER*, *Marcus Welby, M.D.* was not so much about the details of medicine as it was about *being* a physician. In an era that celebrated the invention of coronary bypass surgery, there were many who said that what mattered most was curing the illness, not comforting the patient.

But today *Marcus Welby, M.D.* deserves another look. You can find reruns on some Christian cable TV stations, and Welby fans reminisce on the Web site Super70s.com. And in a 1984 movie that's available on video—*The Return of Marcus Welby, M.D.*—a hospital



Robert Young as the good doctor.

tries to cut the privileges of its oldest doctors, including Welby, considering their skills obsolete.

After 9/11 there was a surge of volunteerism that evoked the old house-call days. Today we need to revive the image of smiling Doc Welby to remind us why we went into medicine in the first place. I am of the generation that grew up with Welby as a role model. The doctor battled each puzzling illness until the diagnosis was made, and the patient was fully treated and made comfortable. Some of these images are still part of my favorite dreams at night. ■

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