The medical profession's love affair with technology may have a chilling effect on relations between doctors and their patients. By Melvin Kanner, M.D.

Have We Lost the Healing Touch?

As countless new gizmos come online, both doctors and patients need more and more discipline to resist overusing them. Unproven technology can be dangerous. All tests have false positives and trigger treatments that are potentially harmful for people who don't need them. As for fixing things, the newest and shiniest tool is not always the best. Just as there are surgical fads—tonsillectomy was one, Caesarean section another—there are gizmo fads as well. The rotoblator, a whirling burr on the end of a wire to ream clogged arteries, came and went in the '90s, bogged down by technical flaws—but not before it was tried on thousands of patients, all of whom thought they were getting the latest and the best.

Increasingly, technology diagnoses problems, triggering treatments whose effectiveness is judged technologically. Patients are sued for omitting it. "Why didn't you do that test, Doctor?" is one question no physician wants to hear. Doctors are sued for applying high technology, but they are often sued for omitting it. "Why didn't you do that test, Doctor?" is one question no physician wants to hear in court.

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