

Goodbye, Hippocrates!

Yes, there is life away from medicine

Three doctors who quit in midcareer have found satisfaction and happiness—if not great wealth—by turning their avocations into new livelihoods in music, real estate, and tennis.

By Berkeley Rice
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Surely you've wondered whether private practice is worth the hassles and pressures of running an office. And maybe you've daydreamed about some other way to make a living—preferably doing something you love as much as medicine.

Well, here are three doctors who've turned their daydreams into reality. How did they do it? What are they earning? Do they have any regrets about leaving practice behind?

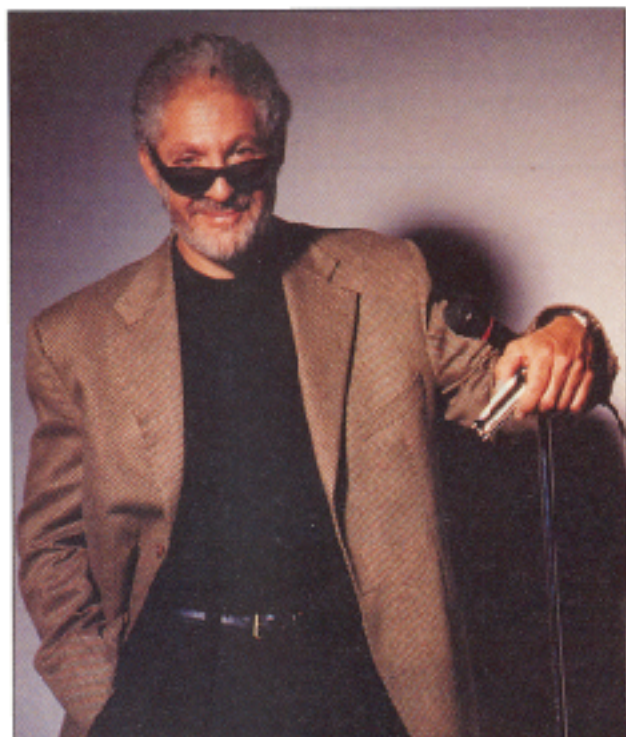
And could you do it, too? Read on.

Dr. Sam and his Managed Care Blues Band

Given his multiple talents, it's not surprising that Sam Bierstock, at age 50, is no longer practicing medicine. He graduated from college with a degree in electrical engineering, then applied to law school—and was accepted—before choosing medical school instead.

After practicing ophthalmology for 15 years in Rhinebeck, N.Y., he quit when a shoulder injury prevented him from doing surgery. In 1992, he moved to Boca Raton, Fla., where he owned a condo.

Drawing on his knowledge of medicine and his experience in computerizing his office in the



Photo, top, courtesy of Sam Bierstock, M.D.

early 1980s, Bierstock became a computer consultant to medical groups. For about five years, he consulted and lectured around the country on medical information systems. Although his earnings from that second career certainly didn't match his former income, they did provide him with a "comfortable" living, he says.

On his travels to medical meetings during that period, Bierstock was increasingly struck by how frustrated and discouraged doctors had become, mainly because of the pressures and hassles of managed care. "I realized then that this profession was in serious need of lightening up," he says.

Whereupon Bierstock launched a third career, as an entertainer. He had been playing blues harmonica for years, jamming with visiting bands at local bars in Boca Raton, or sitting in with groups on "open mike" nights at clubs during his consulting trips.

When Bierstock first got the idea of starting his own "integrated music delivery system," he recruited several colleagues from the local medical community: a dentist on keyboard, a medical technician on guitar, and a thoracic surgeon on drums, plus a professional musician on bass. He named the group "Dr. Sam and the Managed Care Blues Band."

"I maintain a list of preferred musical providers," Bierstock deadpans. "People can listen to other musicians if they want, but that's going to come out of their own pockets."

To provide material for his new group, Dr. Sam has written a number of songs about doctors' troubles with managed care. He's smart enough to realize that any straightforward attempt to explain managed care would put audiences to sleep. By parodying the subject in music, however, he has accomplished the same goal in an entertaining medium.

Among his original offerings: "Please Mr. UR Man," "You Picked a Fine Time to Leave Me Blue Shield," and "You're One

Hip Mama ('Cause They Won't Pay for Two)."

While most physicians love Dr. Sam's humor, he was concerned at first that it might be lost on non-medical people who haven't had much experience with managed care. Fortunately for Bierstock, most have, and they don't like it any more than doctors do.

Playing to that public attitude about managed care in a mock interview, Dr. Sam answers some common questions



"As a physician, I feel the best care for doctors' troubles with managed care is a good laugh."

—Sam Bierstock, former ophthalmologist

about his new group, tongue firmly embedded in cheek.

►Who should listen to managed music?

"Anyone who's sick of paying high prices for tapes and CDs. Just send me \$100 per month, and I'll provide all the music you could want. Of course, I'll decide what music it is, and how much you really need. But I won't tell you that until after you have subscribed."

►How did you find talented medical musicians for your group?

"Initially, I didn't care if they were really that good. Once our listeners are locked into paying for our music, we can pretty much play anything we want because they don't have much choice. Where else are they going to find a doctors' band?"

►How come your new band members aren't physicians?

"This is managed music. Once we take people's money, we substitute as many non-medical people as we can, because they're cheaper, and better musicians."

►What if people don't like your music?

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"We have a review mechanism—but we won't get to your request for several months. If we delay long enough, you may age to the point where your musical tastes change. Better yet, we'll outlive you, which means we collected your dollars without doing anything for you."

When it comes to his band, Bierstock is actually quite serious. He has hired a full-time secretary to handle phones and mail, a booking agent, and two publicists. Dr. Sam and the band have been written up in *People* magazine and other publications, and featured on national radio and television.

Thanks to the publicity, the band has attracted invitations from medical and other organizations around the country. For groups with limited budgets, like small hospitals or county medical societies, Dr. Sam might perform with just one other musician. He might also give a humorous talk—he's an accomplished

stand-up comic by now.

Among other recent engagements, the full band has performed for a Blue Cross and Blue Shield conference in West Palm Beach, an orthopedic meeting in Baltimore, a malpractice insurance company in Dallas, a PHO in Nashville, a pharmaceutical company in Tampa, and a medical-equipment manufacturer in Santa Barbara.

As the group attracted more out-of-state gigs last year, its medical musicians found they couldn't keep up with their performing schedule and still continue their regular careers. So all but the dentist (who adjusts his practice around the band's trips) have been replaced with professional musicians. Now that his music is providing him with a better income than he earned from consulting, Bierstock devotes himself full time to managing, promoting, and playing with the band.

The band's recording, available

on cassette and CD and titled "Minimal Service—CPT 99211" ("free plus a \$14.95 copay"), was released last November and is selling well. In addition to individual sales at performances, several hospitals and other organizations have ordered the recording as gifts for their medical staffs. Rep. Greg Ganske, M.D. (R-Iowa), recently ordered 535 cassettes to give to every member of the House and Senate.

Despite his musical humor, Dr. Sam has a serious purpose behind his performances. "Sure, we're having a good time with our band," he says. "As a physician, I feel the best cure for doctors' troubles with managed care is a good laugh. But we're also trying to help people understand how managed care really works—or why it doesn't."

For information on Dr. Sam and his Managed Care Blues Band, call 561-243-3673, or try his Web site (www.managedmusic.com).

Judyth Box, psychiatrist turned entrepreneur

Judy Box may have acquired her independent streak while growing up on a sheep farm in Australia. Today, she and her husband grow much of their own fruits and vegetables on their farm in Marysville, Ohio, not far from Columbus. They also raise their own chickens, as well as catfish, bass, and bluegills in three ponds.

After college and medical school in Australia, Box came to the United States in 1972 for her internship and residency in psychiatry. She spent the next 20 years working in and around Columbus, both in private practice and as a staff psychiatrist at various institutions.

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