

Trade Barriers

John Hanks, DC

I have been known to barter with patients. That is, I have traded my services, for goods or services offered by my patients. (Note: If anyone from the IRS is reading this, please understand this is about some other chiropractor and is totally fiction, just a pretend story, not about me.) Anyway, I have made some reasonable trades, such as haircuts, and dog food from the local feed store, but some have been of questionable value.

The first time a patient brought up the subject of "making a trade," it was because he was short on funds and needed some significant chiropractic care. He wondered if I would accept a Navajo blanket as payment. I thought about it, but quickly realized I needed money, since I was new in practice and had plenty of debts. "I'm sorry, Mr. Begay," I think I said, "but my banker doesn't accept Navajo blankets." The DC I worked for at the time, however, was an avid barter fan. I once found myself following him into a crawl space under a prospective patient's home, looking at the man's enormous collection of jewelry and weapons. I think the doctor ended up trading adjustments for a couple of turquoise squash blossom necklaces and an Italian shotgun.

The second time I bartered was with Dave, the owner of a bicycle shop. I came home with a tricycle and a scooter for my young kids. Over the next few years, I treated the owner, his many daughters, his wife, brothers, and I forget who else in the family. Consequently, I acquired road bikes, mountain bikes, new kids' bikes, and two mopeds. The neighbors began to shun my family, thinking we were running "hot" stolen merchandise out of the garage.

Jose had a firewood business and suggested I treat him in exchange for wood. It made perfect sense to me, so one winter morning, I pulled into his lot, where he had big piles of various types of firewood. After I filled up my trailer, it was necessary to go inside a big RV motor home (apparently, the "office") to account for the fuel. When I went inside, there were about seven other customers standing in line, waiting to pay. Jose was in bed with his girlfriend, drinking coffee and bourbon, writing out receipts. It was about 9 a.m. "Hi Doc!" he said when he saw me, "Did you get the oak? It's good and dry!" His girlfriend seemed bored by all this and just kept reading her NASCAR magazine.

I have bartered for things I didn't want or need, just because I couldn't say no to a patient. (Note again to IRS: I mean some other guy I heard about.) The most embarrassing, was for doilies and toilet paper "cozies." For those of you who don't follow championship crocheting on reality television, doilies are handmade, decorative mats used to protect furniture like coffee tables (or, as was the case in my grandmother's home, candy bowls, filled with hard candy no one ate). But a "cozy" is hard to describe. *Webster's Dictionary* defines it as, "A padded covering, especially for a tea-pot, to keep the contents hot." So, a crocheted, padded covering for a spare roll of toilet paper, to doll it up and make it less conspicuous in the bathroom, is well ... special. Quirky and special, but not something I would want proudly displayed on the tank top of my toilet.

I have traded for services with patients who were down on their luck and needed a job. When my wife and I were building a new home in the early '80s, I enlisted the help of a cabinet-maker patient named Danny. He had showed me pictures of his work and I was impressed. I figured

bartering treatment for his labor would result in some great cabinets for the kitchen. But Danny showed up during odd hours while working on the project, sometimes working day and night for three days, and then not showing up for a week. That should have been my first clue. Finally, Danny just quit showing up.

The cabinets did turn out great, except for the bottom cabinet doors, which Danny had at his house.

Did I mention Danny had a ponytail so long that he could sit on it? Yes, he was an old Hippie-type, so I should not have been surprised when I went to his house to pick up the cabinet doors. At least I could install them myself. Danny met me at his front door, brushing some sort of white powder off his upper lip. "Sorry about this, John," he said. "I know I haven't been taking care of business, lately." He led me out to his workshop to get the doors. Danny opened the workshop door, and suddenly my olfactory lobe exploded, like being at a ZZ Top concert. He led me through a forest of marijuana plants, back to where the doors were stored. "These plants are just for my personal use, you know. It keeps me from getting glaucoma."

Well, I didn't know. I felt like I was in an early Cheech and Chong movie. What I did know was that I had to air out the doors in the back yard for a week, just to minimize the Jamaican Bud smell embedded in the wood.

I have made a resolution not to trade services for stuff I don't want, or help out wayward, incompetent artisans. I would rather give my care free to those folks who appreciate it, rather than expect an "equal" trade of services and be disappointed. After all, who was it that said, "No good deed goes unpunished"?

John Hanks, DC
Denver, Colorado
jwhanksdc@earthlink.net

NOVEMBER 2005