

## DIFFICULT DOCTOR-PATIENT-FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

SUMMARY: “Doc-In-A-Box” – The author of the novel of the same title from which this excerpt is taken is a neurologist who practices in the San Francisco Bay area. The excerpt describes the presentation of a patient with a longstanding complaint of headache and his belligerent wife to a walk-in clinic. Although the doctor on duty, Dr. Webb, has just resolved to behave more compassionately toward his patients, he is defeated by this couple’s dysfunctional dynamics and his inability to render them any real assistance.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. How would you describe the dynamics between the patient and his wife?
2. What is this patient feeling and thinking? What is his wife feeling and thinking?
3. How does Dr. Webb experience this situation?
4. What is the “problem” in this story? (possible answers: husband’s passivity, wife’s demandingness, doctor’s helplessness)
5. How does this story end? (failure, lack of communication) Can you imagine another ending?
6. What evidence is there that this story could take a different turn? (patient help-seeking; wife’s efforts to find solution for husband; physician’s desire to be more compassionate)

### TRIANGULATION ISSUES

1. Illicit coalition – patient and wife against (bad) doctor
2. Dyadic enmeshment – wife and doctor’s interaction excludes patient

SUMMARY: “The Use of Force” William Carlos Williams, the renowned physician-poet-short story writer who described his practice among the immigrant poor in Paterson, New Jersey, and was posthumously awarded a Pulitzer Prize. Before the invention of the diphtheria vaccine, a pediatrician makes a home visit in response to the worried summons of parents of a sick child, Mathilde. The Olsens, awed by the authority of the doctor and the power of their daughter’s illness, retreat into passivity and ineffectuality. The little girl, on the other hand, ferociously battles against the doctor’s ministrations. The doctor pits his will against that of his patient, determined to triumph by examining her throat and thereby perhaps saving her life.

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What happens in this triangulation of child-patient, parents, and doctor?
2. How could the parents be utilized more effectively by the physician?
3. What other approaches might the doctor have tried with Mathilde?

#### TRIANGULATION ISSUES:

1. Dyadic enmeshment – involvement of patient and doctor is so strong (albeit so negative) that it effectively excludes parents
2. Illicit coalition – parents implicitly align with powerful physician when they acquiesce to his “attack” on their daughter