

FAMILIES * DIFFICULT PATIENTS/FAMILIES

SUMMARY: “The Use of Force” William Carlos Williams

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