

5 Great Medical Lessons from Funny Movies



By *Jamie Wells, M.D.* — May 10, 2017



Credit: Shutterstock [1]

Since I am a huge proponent of laughter often being good medicine, I didn't have to look very far to find funny movie scenes that also delivered meaningful medical lessons.

Limiting the number of options became the challenge!

So, here are **5 examples** from films where medical knowledge can be extracted from the humor (of note, be aware there is cursing in some of the linked clips and so may be NSFW) :

Space Cowboys (2000)

Clint Eastwood, Tommy Lee Jones, Donald Sutherland and James Garner play former NASA crew members finally getting their shot to go on a repair mission in space. To do so, they must meet the same physical standards, usually by much younger colleagues, to get the go ahead to undertake their dream journey.

Here, Clint Eastwood's and Tommy Lee Jones's characters compete over who will pass out first. In this scene, we witness their responses to acceleration (aka G-forces) when put through a centrifuge test:

Artificial gravity testing (aka high-G training) is intended to simulate what one might experience in flight or space. Knowing what a person's tolerance is to these gravitational forces and building it up is a matter of life and death. At a certain point which can vary between individuals, G-force induced loss of consciousness (G-LOC) can lead to crashes. With hypergravity states, the blood to the brain can retreat and flow outward while pooling toward the lower extremities. Angles of forces and types of training modules have different effects.

From this scene, we are led to believe it is the extra acceleration that leads to the passing out.

There are methods to enhance tolerance and special compression suits are designed to redirect blood flow toward the upper body and head. Additionally, fighter pilots often employ an Anti-G Straining Maneuver (AGSM) otherwise called the “Hick maneuver” to diminish the risk of blacking out. The physiology is quite fascinating if you have time to read about it.

Here, the cast undergoes a basic vision screen:

■ In this sequence, Donald Sutherland’s character by virtue of his thick glasses alone would tip off a health care provider that further assessment than the basic Snellen eye chart would be essential for proper, thorough evaluation. Because medical clearances can have specific requirements for the occupational task at hand, it is quite realistic that a person could be excluded if they failed a particular portion. To review what a physician considers in clearing a patient for a particular job or activity, see [Who’s NOT Medically Fit to Be President?](#) [2] or [Medical Exemptions for Jury Duty](#) [3].

Or course, lying to one’s health care provider can prompt serious deleterious consequences. As I always say in medicine, good information can save lives while bad information can end them. Withholding parts of one’s medical history can lead to a host of preventable complications. Medication errors and adverse interactions are but one mere example. Whether you think it is relevant or not, more information is safer than less when it comes to medical treatment and disease management.

***Spies Like Us* (1985)**

In this Dan Ackroyd and Chevy Chase classic, the actors portray not-too-swift U.S. spies who are really being used as decoys. Ridiculous misadventures ensue.

Among them include masquerading as world-renowned physicians. In this scene, they assume surgical identities while lacking any actual training or expertise:

■ What’s to glean here? Reviewing a medical provider’s actual credentials is a wonderful starting point whenever seeking health care and therapies. Each state has a certifying medical board that can verify licensure and whether there are individual restrictions or malpractice cases ongoing or in the past. The significance of that information needs to be further teased out, but at a minimum validating a doctor’s educational background and Board-certification status demonstrates a baseline level of medical knowledge on their part.

In so doing, the following clip would be entirely avoided. Thankfully, in the real world it should be an unheard of experience anyway.

■ Here, the entirety is hilarious as such a scenario is a fictional one. First, if a surgeon requires looking at a book to perform a common procedure like an appendectomy, then that would be a legitimate reason to run. Second, when he confuses the anterior chest with the right lower quadrant of the abdomen to proceed with his incision to remove the appendix another big clue of incompetence is on full display. Third, when a patient is sedated it would be quite uncommon to have zero pieces of monitoring equipment. Whether light or heavy sedation, vital signs are critical warranting close surveillance (see [Do Vital Signs Wrong and Pay Ultimate Price](#) [4]). Only then are untoward events avoided; for, they can be discovered expeditiously without going down an unnecessary negative trajectory. Additionally, the surgical site would be shaved and sterilized to

prevent introduction of infection prior to the first scalpel use. A few second palpation of a peripheral pulse would also not be adequate or sufficient for formal pronouncement of death. The list of errors is endless.

***There's Something About Mary* (1998)**

Ben Stiller plays a guy who gets the opportunity to meet up with his fantasy woman from high school.

In this disastrous flashback scene of his big prom debacle, we witness his character experience a freak accident with his zipper and genitalia. Though the close-up of this is fake and brief, the image might be disturbing so decide whether to view before opening the link.

■ This situation is not so far fetched. I have repeatedly written about preventable, unintentional injuries and their surging rise by 23%. See [We're Killing Ourselves](#) [5] or [Leonard Cohen's Death by Falling Among Top 5 Causes](#) [6] or [An Article NOT about the Election](#) [7].

Additionally, I did an entire series called Inanimate Objects in Orifices about accidental and intentional, unintentional injuries throughout all body parts spanning all ages. The one involving the [penis and urethra](#) [8] is apropos with this film clip. Read my [Inanimate Objects in Orifices](#) [9] series tackling the [eyes](#) [10], ears, nose, throat, [vagina](#) [11] and [penis](#) [12].

Seeking early medical care with an injury is preferable. It is often vital to preserving an organ's intended function and avoiding complications. In this example, stopping bleeding, avoiding infection and assessing the extent of injury would be the medical focus. Wound healing and management essential to the plan.

***Something's Gotta Give* (2003)**

Jack Nicholson plays a forever bachelor who while at the start of a dalliance does not make it beyond the kissing when profound chest pain and symptoms of a heart attack take place. Diane Keaton comes to his rescue to initiate CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation).

■ Upon discovery of his medical state, Keaton's character correctly commands her daughter to call 911. Then, she proceeds to administer onsite bystander CPR. Her mouth-to-mouth appears to begin while Nicholson's character is still conscious and talking to her which is a bit fuzzy and atypical about the portrayal, but, regardless, a working knowledge of CPR is a wonderful asset for the masses to have should such a situation ever present itself (See [Want a Nation of Superheroes? Early CPR Makes Every Second Count!](#) [13]). Getting certified and trained is never a waste of time.

As the episode progresses, he is wheeled into the emergency room to be acutely treated by a doctor played by Keanu Reeves. It is here that we learn the importance of being truthful with your treating physician.

■ As previously described in the ***Space Cowboys*** section, omitting valuable information can put your health at risk. In the context of this scene, it is important to have a certain time period elapse after Viagra use and even longer for Cialis so as to avoid a serious drug interaction that could induce severe hypotension (e.g. low blood pressure) and even worse impact. Coadministration

carries real risk. To review the 2014 Report of the American College of Cardiology/American Heart Association Task Force on Practice Guidelines, see [here](#) [14].

Death Becomes Her (1992)

After taking a magic potion that ensures eternal youth, Meryl Streep's character starts to garner insight into the reality of her new undead condition when she— along with Bruce Willis' character— visit the doctor in this scene.

What I most enjoy is the doctor's response to his physical examination of Streep. It is so rare to shock a physician because the dramatic and vast scope of the medical training and practicing experience often overloads us with exposures. So, finding no heart beat, being significantly hypothermic (very low core body temperature) and without an ability to feel pain in a responsive, communicative and conscious woman would likely be a bit unsettling for a practitioner. But, getting to the bottom of it would be the goal of an expert diagnostician.

Of note is the fact that when one studies basic pharmacology, you learn that medicines turn something on while turning something else off, hence, why side effects occur to disparate degrees. The take home message being when something seems too good to be true, it usually is.

Ascertaining the down side prior to ingesting any promise of eternal youth would always be in your best interest. Prevention, prevention, prevention is often the safest bet. Once consumed, not all damage is reversible.

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