

Celebrity Patients: Myths, Realities, and What These Cases Teach Us

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Columbia University Medical Center
Humphries Auditorium
Vanderbilt Clinic 14-240
622 West 168th Street
New York, NY 10032

In his lecture *Celebrity Patients: Myths, Realities, and What These Cases Teach Us* Barron Lerner, MD, PhD, discussed the phenomenon of celebrity illness and the press.

Steve McQueen had cancer and was keeping it secret. Then the media found out, and soon all of America knew. McQueen's high profile changed forever the way the public perceived a dreaded disease.

In *Celebrity Patients: Myths, Realities, and What These Cases Teach Us*, Barron H. Lerner described the evolution of celebrities' illnesses from private matters to stories of great public interest. Famous people who have become symbols of illness include Lou Gehrig, the first "celebrity patient"; Rita Hayworth, whose Alzheimer disease went undiagnosed for years; and Arthur Ashe, who courageously went public with his AIDS diagnosis before the media could reveal his secret. And then there are private citizens like Barney Clark, the first recipient of a permanent artificial heart, and Lorenzo Odone, whose neurological disorder became the subject of a Hollywood film.

While celebrity illnesses have helped to inform patients about treatment options, ethical controversies, and scientific proof, the stories surrounding these illnesses have also assumed mythical characteristics that may be misleading. Marrying great storytelling to an exploration of the intersection of science, journalism, fame, and legend, Dr. Lerner's talk was a groundbreaking contribution to our understanding of health and illness.