

# New Ohlone instructor speaks about the real ER

By **ERIC DORMAN**  
Features editor

Treating sick celebrities, treading lightly around the local Mafia and witnessing psychiatric shenanigans involving fake murder and bribery, all for substandard pay—and you thought your job was difficult.

In “Stories from Real-Life ER: a Physician Talks about Her Career as an Emergency Room Doctor” life-long emergency room doctor Gessica Johnston detailed some of her most memorable stories and gave advice on Friday at the fourth Brown Bag Science Seminar of the semester.

Johnston, an M.D. who worked full-time in emergency rooms for more than 30 years before going part-time to teach biology at Ohlone last year, had plenty to say about her career choice’s challenges as well as its benefits.

“Medicine is a career that’s always going to be there,” said Johnston, who teaches Bio 107, Biology of Sexual Reproduction. “The hours are long, the pay is only decent, but it’s a career.”

Johnston started off her talk by trying to clear up some common misconceptions surrounding doctors. First off, she said, doctors are just regular people, no more perfect than the average human being. Secondly, she claimed that physicians are not all fabulously wealthy, either; most pediatricians earn yearly salaries of around \$90,000. Thirdly, doctors aren’t all brilliant. “All you

have to do to get through medical school is get into medical school,” Johnston declared.

Still, even getting into medical school wasn’t an easy process for Johnston. Married with two young children, she had no intention of becoming a doctor when UCLA asked her if she was interested in getting a medical degree through it. Without telling her husband, she flew down for the interview and ultimately got in.

Because the Army paid Johnston’s way through medical school, the first work she did was at the now famous Walter Reed hospital. Because the emergency room offered regular shifts, it quickly became Johnston’s favorite place to work.

After spending a month at Walter Reed, Johnston traveled back to California, where she worked for three months in the emergency room in San Francisco General Hospital. Johnston said her medical training there was something she never could get today because it was so hands-on.

“These days, you just don’t get that kind of training.”

When her three months were up, Johnston was offered a job at an emergency room in a small town outside Los Angeles. Though she started out as doctor, she quickly rose to the position of director.

Unfortunately, the local Mafia was quite active in Johnston’s town (in order to protect the innocent, she did not mention the name) and

the “boss” asked Johnston specifically to work with them. Johnston declined, but a friend, who also worked in the emergency room, was not as wise. He soon left the town and did not return.

Not all of Johnston’s stories had elements of danger; many of them were more bizarre than scary. For example, Johnston shared one emergency room with a psychiatry unit, which contained both a doctor and a psychiatrist. The two didn’t get along very well to begin with, and matters weren’t helped by the fact that every Easter, the doctor dressed in a bunny suit for the festivities.

Feeling that this behavior was unprofessional, and not being on very good terms with the doctor in the first place, the psychiatrist divulged to his patients one day that he “wished somebody would just kill the guy.”

He didn’t mean it, but that was all the local mob, who had been plotting to smear the psychiatrist, needed. They took the doctor in his bunny suit to the desert, poured ketchup over him to look like blood, and snapped a picture of his apparently dead body.

They then gave the picture to one of the psychiatrist’s more mentally unstable patients, and told him to give it to the psychiatrist and tell him that he had killed the doctor, as asked.

When the patient presented the faked tale and picture to the psychiatrist, the latter individual

believed every word. When asked by the patient to write a check for \$100,000 to keep the whole thing quiet, the psychiatrist wrote the check at once. He was picked up the next day by the police and charged in the coverup. As a result, for one day Johnston worked as a psychiatrist.

Through her life working in an emergency room, a few faces stood out. One was singer Frank Sinatra, and another was woman tennis star Billie Jean King, who came in complaining of chest pain.

In another emergency room, a woman came in, asking for treatment. It appeared that she only understood Spanish, so Johnston—a native English speaker—had to struggle through her explanation of treatment to the woman, who continued to ask detailed questions.

Much to Johnston’s chagrin, as

the woman was being wheeled out of the room after treatment, she sat up and said in flawless English, “Boy, I hate gringos who think they can speak Spanish.”

On a more serious note, Johnston also addressed the challenges facing those who choose to work in emergency rooms today. For example, Johnston said last year she earned only one-third the salary that she earned in 1980. At the same time, she noted that malpractice insurance and premiums have skyrocketed.

“I earn \$125 for saving someone’s life,” said Johnston.

The next Brown Bag Science Seminar will be Friday, April 13 from 11:45 a.m. to 12:45 p.m. in Room 3201. It will be titled “Farming in the Bay Area: Breeding, Direct Marketing and Filling Niches” and the speakers will be Fred Hempel and Jill Shepard.

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