



Plain People Doctor

Bless the Lord who crowns you with tender mercies (Psalm 103, NKJV).

I grew up in Burnett County, northern Wisconsin, where one January in the early 1950s the temperature dipped to 40 below zero. Sometimes the concern was snow. I have a photo of my father shoveling a path to the barn, both sides piled above his head. The cows had to be milked, manure shoveled out, and always a path to the outhouse. The one-room school would temporarily close. Days like that were filled with dreams of spring. These days I dream of our three scheduled 10-day winter road trips, hiking and biking in warmer southern climates.

With modern machinery, farmers in Wisconsin no longer endure such winter hardships—unless they're Amish. Vernon County is several counties south of Burnett, but the icy wind is just as bitter, stabbing right through coats and buggies. "It is 5 degrees below zero," Mark Johnson writes in *Plain People Doctor* (January 2020). "A few horses and buggies clop through the chill morning air, but Perry Hochstetler leaves his buggy at the family farm and has a driver take him to his doctor's appointment."

Amish communities rely on their own people for "health insurance," often with no doctors within buggy distance and little money to pay high medical bills. But in Vernon County that changed in 1983, when James DeLine set up practice in the rural village of La Farge, population fewer than 800. In the nearly four decades that followed, Dr. DeLine played a critical role among the "Plain People" in that county and beyond.

"Something of a throwback himself," Johnson writes, "DeLine, 65, is a short, bespectacled man with a walrus mustache, a doctor who carries a brown medical bag to house calls. For years, he carried his equipment in a fishing tackle box." Names, addresses and maladies are stored mainly in his memory. Indeed, he might

recognize a buggy as easily as most people recognize a neighbor's car.

He knows the families on every local farm and their medical histories. He knows who's been born, and calls on the mothers and infants to make sure they are healthy. He knows who's dying, and looks in on them in their final days, sitting by their bedside, talking in a gentle voice, making sure they have what they need for pain.

Just out of med school, DeLine could not have imagined he would find himself straddling old customs and cutting-edge science, often collaborating with geneticists in the study of rare diseases and their significance in isolated populations. During his long tenure, Amish in the region cultivated a deep trust in him, knowing he would not profit from their health records used to help others. Indeed, these "closed communities...increase the likelihood that when a rare, disease-causing mutation appears...it will take root and pass from generation to generation."

Though "not a religious man himself," the good doctor has high regard for the people and has assured them that they will make the final decisions on their own health.

Knowing that, his "clinic has become a magnet for "Plain People." Some travel eight hours from Missouri or Iowa just to see him," bypassing nearby "doctors who neither respect their beliefs nor understand their financial limitations."

Dr. DeLine in many respects lives an ordinary life of a country doctor. He takes vacations like most doctors do. But in the weeks before he leaves, he posts notices in the weekly newspaper. Word quickly spreads that lingering medical problems and other concerns should be checked before his departure.

At the same time, he has been known to delay his vacation for sudden illnesses—tender mercies for those who hardly know what a vacation is. □

—Ruth Tucker