

Patients are wooing doctors with private plane rides and diamonds

By Beth Landman

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Some New York City doctors woo patients via subway advertisements and glowing features in fashion magazines. And then there are the doctors whose patients woo them.

Dr. Paul Jarrod Frank, an Upper East Side dermatologist, has received an “Imperial” bottle of Opus One wine (which can retail for more than \$5,000) from a grateful patient and was offered a trip via NetJets to Miami from another. Even his sister Ann, who is in charge of his appointment scheduling, is on the receiving end of gifts.

“If you need an appointment or extra care, she is the one to go to,” Frank said. “One woman from Jordan gave her a pair of diamond earrings!”

He added, “We don’t accept gifts in return for service . . . but if someone wants to show appreciation, there is nothing wrong with that. I don’t want people to think they will be treated better [if they give gifts]; it’s just appreciation for making them feel special, and I’m always pleasantly shocked.”

With people struggling to get the attention of first-rate practitioners, giving presents to doctors, nurses and medical staff is becoming almost as common as tipping doormen or waiters. Either as an expression of gratitude or in hopes of standing out as VIPs, patients and their loved ones are showing up with everything from bags of Sugarfina candy and restaurant gift cards to parcels from Hermès and Cartier. If you walked into a popular Manhattan doctor’s office over the holiday season, it’s likely you saw piles of boxes tied with ribbons.

‘In the event I need their help, I want to make sure I have [my doctor’s] attention’

“I am doing it for what I believe are the right reasons: to acknowledge how much they’ve helped me — and in the event I need their help [again], I want to make sure I have their attention,” said one 59-year-old banker who lives on Park Avenue and just sent both his internist and orthopedist magnums of premium Barbaresco.

Maternity wards are full of beaming moms ordering up baked goods for hospital staff, but families of ill patients often go further.

“There was one patient in the heart unit of New York [Presbyterian] hospital who used to hand out hundreds to the nurses,” one physician recalled.

The American Medical Association does not have any specific rules about patients giving doctors gifts — nor is it illegal — but doctors are divided about the types of presents they will accept.

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Dr. Christopher Calapai, an East Meadow, LI, osteopath who specializes in stem-cell therapy, recently received Cartier cuff links and Champagne glasses, a Montblanc pen, and a gift certificate for dinner at Per Se, while Jane Scher, a registered nurse, was showered with an Hermès scarf, Godiva chocolates and a \$100 Starbucks card from patients.

"They thank me because they are happy," Calapai said.

"A physician has to judge," said John Connolly, a partner in Castle Connolly, which publishes the annual listing directory America's Top Doctors. "With hospitals it depends; some have a policy against it.

Small gifts of thoughtfulness may be appropriate, but if gifts are significant it could prove to be an issue. Is it appreciation, or is someone hoping to acquire a preferred relationship? I don't believe it will influence a doctor, but a physician has to judge."

Dr. Marc Lowenberg, a Central Park South dentist, recalled how after he veneered the teeth of two men in finance, one offered the use of his private plane and the other the use of his yacht.

"I didn't take them up on those things because I don't want to be indebted, but an actress gave me the use of her estate in Maine with complete staff for a vacation, and that I did take her up on," Lowenberg said.

"Typically, a lot of our patients send us sweaters or gift certificates after we re-create their smiles. There is nothing wrong with accepting a gift after work is paid for, though it's a little surprising that after spending \$50,000 to \$80,000 for a smile makeover, they still want to send a present."