

Cunegonde's ears, or multiple medical errors

When Miss Cunegonde first arrived from the 18th century, riding on her broomstick, she had hoped to set up her own web page, appear on the Larry King show, and meet Miss Monica Lewinsky. Instead she developed a urinary infection unrelieved by Chinese herbs, megavitamins, acupuncture, and high doses of ibuprofen.

In the emergency room at the hospital the clerk misspells her name with a K, records her date of birth as 1980, loses her broomstick, but eventually enrolls her in this benevolent healthcare system in which countless other "undocumented" that is, illegal immigrants receive chronic dialysis or cardiology or oncology treatment, indefinitely and at no cost to themselves.

That night on the medical floor the intern prescribes meetofloxacin, but the nurse, her mind on a late in life passionate love affair, forgets to administer the prescribed dose.

The next day Cunegonde is worse. The intern prescribes ampicillin, but forgets to ask about allergies. Now she looks like a bad case of measles.

The infectious diseases fellow now recommends putrimicin, a powerful new antibiotic with a wide spectrum of activity against diseases acquired before the French revolution. Five minutes later Cunegonde's right ear drops off, an unexpected reaction that premarketing testing had failed to detect and that should be reported in a letter to the *BMJ*.

Eventually Cunegonde recovers. Her pelvis and kidneys are fine, but the other end looks strangely asymmetrical with only one ear. She has surgery to stitch it back, but is mixed up in the operating room with the also earless Miss Cunningham and receives an ear two sizes too large an error that experts now hope to avoid by adopting the systems that prevent most (but not all) aeroplanes from plunging into the sea.

An immunologist now suggests a heterotransplant like the one that had worked so well on King Midas. But Cunegonde decides to call it quits. She lets her hair grow long and looks for her broomstick. Blissfully unaware of the local malpractice racket, she returns to between the covers of M. de Voltaire or rather of his book. She plans to add a chapter on preventing medical errors by throwing all doctors and their medicines to the bottom of the sea.