



# Duke University Medical Center

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## Hospital hoboes 'cry wolf' to get medical care

By David Williamson

If your doctor has ever treated a patient with Munchausen's syndrome, one of the quickest ways to make him angry may be to remind him of the fact.

Odds are that it wasn't a very satisfying experience. These patients go from hospital to hospital, dreaming up reasons to be admitted.

The syndrome is one of the most bizarre conditions medical personnel have to deal with, according to Dr. Allan A. Maltbie, assistant professor of psychiatry. It's also one of the most frustrating.

### Complete with symptoms

In a typical case, a patient will arrive at a hospital with an apparently acute illness complete with a plausible medical history and symptoms, Maltbie said.

After a series of examinations, tests and sometimes surgery, doctors will discover that the patient has been leading them on and there is nothing physically wrong with him. When psychiatric evaluation is suggested, the patient quickly leaves the hospital.

"This same pattern may then be

repeated with other doctors and other hospitals in an attempt to secure admission," the psychiatrist said. "The patient may wander around the country presenting his false story often enough that he literally lives from hospital to hospital."

### 32 hospitals in two years

Don Woodin, public information director for the North Carolina Hospital

Association, said that one patient has been admitted to at least 32 hospitals within the past two years, including 14 in North Carolina.

"We have consequently estimated that this person has cost the hospitals more than \$35,000 over the 24 months," he said.

Another patient successfully impersonates doctors on the telephone to

order his own admission. He has even generated large florist bills by sending flowers to himself.

Woodin said his organization maintains files on known Munchausen patients and tracks their movement to warn hospitals when they are likely to turn up.

"We're interested in sparing hospitals the expense of these people, but that's not our sole concern," he said. "It is conceivable that someone who is genuinely ill could be affected if the last critical care bed in a hospital is occupied unnecessarily."

### Peregrines

Maltbie, who has seen a number of patients with the syndrome in his capacity as head of the Psychiatry Liaison Service at the VA Hospital, said the condition was named after an 18th century cavalry officer who travelled from town to town telling of his wild but highly unlikely adventures in Russia.

Other names that have been suggested in medical literature include "hospital hoboes" and "peregrinating problem patients."

Patients sometimes complain of headaches, seizures, bleeding from various body orifices, stomach pains or heart problems. Others may swallow any of a variety of objects, including razor blades, coins, lightbulbs and nails.

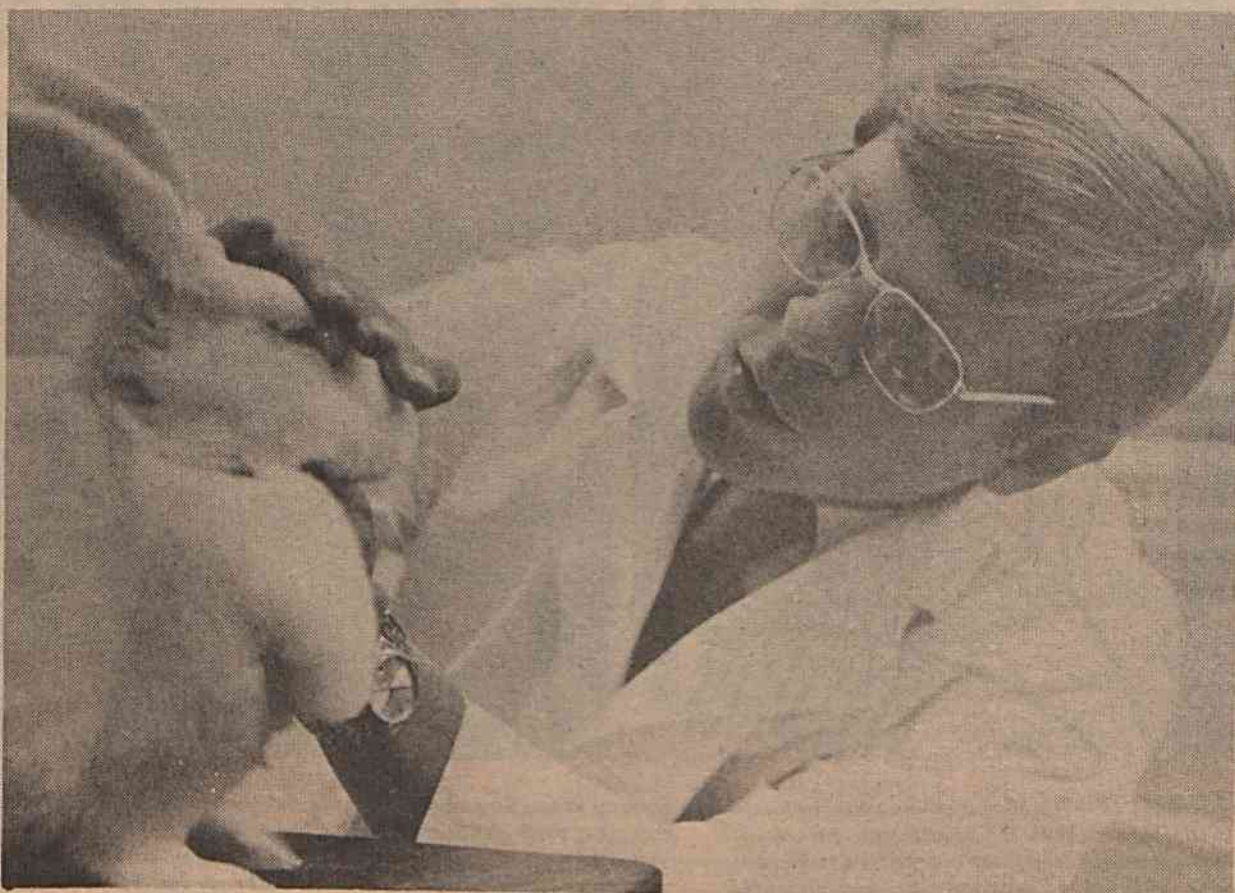
"The particular illnesses these people may feign are many and varied," Maltbie

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**Holiday check early**  
Christmas is coming, but paychecks are coming earlier.  
The payroll office has announced that the faculty and staff payday for this month will be Dec. 16.  
Biweekly employees, who would normally be paid Dec. 24, will receive those checks a day early.

## Dog's best friend not necessarily his master



DR. JOSEPH L. WAGNER

By David Williamson

A man's best friend may be his dog, but a dog's best friend isn't necessarily his master, especially with cold weather coming on.

That's the opinion of Dr. Joseph L. Wagner, a veterinarian who oversees the daily care and well-being of some 40,000 animals as director of Duke's Division of Laboratory Animal Resources, the vivarium on Research Drive.

It's not that canines can't stand low temperatures, Wagner says. On the contrary, most healthy, mature dogs adapt well to winter weather because nature provides them with an insulating layer of fat and a heavier hair coat.

But when man manipulates an animal's environment artificially, potential problems can arise, Wagner said.

"If you happen to be an irresponsible dog owner and permit your dog to roam free, as long as he can find food and water, he's smart enough to find shelter and a place that he can sleep," Wagner said. "A dog that's tied up outside in wind and sleet or put in a pen without shelter, however, can get frostbitten or freeze to death."

### Not all dogs are huskies

How well dogs can withstand harsh winters depend upon their age, health, breed and acclimation to the environment, Wagner said.

A dog that has been kept inside much of its life, a puppy or a Chihuahua, for example, will be in greater danger from the cold than a husky that was originally bred to live outside in temperatures well below zero, he explained.

Wagner recommends that all animals, including livestock, have clean, dry shelters insulated against the weather and containing water supplies that are not frozen. Such shelters are essential for maintaining the health of animals kept out-of-doors, he said.

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