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## Smart, Caring (and Regrettably Fictitious) – Rex Morgan M.D. for President?

Cynthia Martin

**H**e's current on health issues, compassionate and never grows old; he's a great cook and a hunk, albeit married to his long-time nurse June Gale. He's *Rex Morgan M.D.*, the comic strip syndicated in 15 countries in 300 newspapers, reaching more than 30 million people. Although fictitious, he's the most well-known physician in the United States.

"I'm on deadline as I'm sending Rex to the U.S. Physicians for a National Health Program conference," says writer Woody Wilson, who, along with illustrator Graham Nolan, has introduced contentious health issues in support of a U.S.-wide health system. Not coincidentally, Wilson is speaking at the same conference in November for the 9,000-member organization that supports healthcare reform based on social justice and medical need. "We may have our detractors, but there are far more people who give us 'attaboys' than those who call me a 'commie pinko liberal,' which they did when Rex testified before Congress," says Wilson.

"Healthcare is a serious situation with some 43 million uninsured, and it's getting worse," he says. "Politicians don't want to touch it as doing anything makes them seem impotent. A country as rich and as powerful as the United States can afford healthcare for its people. My fellow Republicans should be mindful that 43 million people is a lot of voters."

Like most other comic strip heroes, Rex is smart, driven and honest – and, erudite. Wilson is refreshingly savvy about language and understands Canadian healthcare. Commenting on the August 27, 2002, headline in *The Globe and Mail*,

which health-savvy Canadians also cringed at – "Rex Morgan's Prescription: Socialized Medicine in U.S." – Wilson clarified that "nowhere do I talk about socialized medicine." Created in 1948 by the late Dr. Nicholas Dallis, an Arizona psychiatrist, *Rex Morgan M.D.* continues to be the archetypal modern family physician, thanks to Wilson, who apprenticed with Dallis and took over fully writing the strip in 1990. While created to entertain, Rex was also envisioned as an educational tool to heighten health awareness.

Readers have seen Rex deal with myriad hot medical and social issues such as drug abuse, violence, HIV/AIDS, diabetes and asthma. However, Wilson incorporated material about policy for several reasons: larger change is needed, covering "hot buttons" keeps Rex current, and it's a way popular culture can positively affect people. The strip's been used in educational sessions across the United States, and in the asthma storyline Wilson featured a toll-free number for a non-profit organization. A major pharmaceutical company underwrote his trip to the asthma conference in Washington where he received one of many public service awards – an irony not lost on Wilson, who thinks pharmaceuticals are far more concerned about profits and margins.

"They paid my plane fare and hotel to receive this award and here's Rex railing against the pharmaceuticals," says Wilson. "They [lobbyists and staff] were very serious, poised and quite intense in their \$1,000 suits. They were the smartest and brightest people." When asked why these people don't work toward health reform, Wilson says it revolves around money.

“When you have a loophole that can make you money, you’re doing it because you can. No one is asking why it costs \$50 for one pill. It’s debilitating and crippling families everywhere. It’s exorbitant,” he stressed. “I consider it to be war profiteering more than anything else.”

Wilson believes “any massive change must come through a revolution, not through current political leadership. There will have to be a critical mass.” He adds, “We have the West Nile virus sweeping across the United States like a plague killing a few dozen people with headlines every five minutes, yet a May 2002 report noted nearly 20,000 people who’ve had no access to healthcare have quietly died this year.”

When a reader complains, Wilson responds. “My response is pretty standard. I tell them their viewpoint is based on a privileged position,” he says. “If they didn’t have health coverage, they’d think differently. I never hear from them again. I also get letters telling me how America’s free market system is the best, which is preposterous.” In spite of complaints, Wilson says, “I try to write the strip in an informative, tasteful way, and we’re not losing papers over it.”

Overwhelmingly, the 50 to 100 letters and e-mails he gets every week are favourable and support Rex’s position, which will continue. As well, there’s no lack of dinner-table subjects; his wife has a PhD in health policy from Brandeis University, and Wilson reads about health constantly in the media and gets ideas everywhere. However, Wilson says this storyline “can get into a situation where we’re constantly harping, but that’s not the point. Somebody needs to get the people mad as hell.”

Does Rex think having 600 U.S. insurance companies is a good thing? No – but anyone who proposed elimination would be shot, says Wilson. As Physicians for a National Health Program ([www.pnhp.org](http://www.pnhp.org)) states, the cost savings here in switching to a single-payer system would fund healthcare for those currently uninsured.

So is the beloved Rex going to get beamed by someone lurking in the conference’s parking garage? Will Rex be offered big bucks to run a pharmaceutical and lose his morals? Is Rex going to run for government? Given U.S. politics, it’s surely not a stretch to imagine campaign buttons for “*Rex Morgan M.D. for President.*” 

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