

Photo by Jeffrey Swart

DRS. BARRY LEVY & GREG LAGANA

damaged care

BY ERIC OLM

Two doctors, two successful careers, two happy marriages. It's time to relax and enjoy the fruits of a productive life. That's what you'd expect from most doctors with over 60 years of combined experience in the medical profession. But you cannot expect the usual when it comes to Drs. Barry Levy and Greg LaGana.

What did these doctors decide to do with their talents and ambitions? Why, write a show, naturally. The result is the topical and humorous musical *Damaged Care*. Combining a love of musical expression with their vast knowledge of the medical field, the singing doctors croon, belt, and kick-line their way through a

45-minute show that is part cabaret, part musical comedy, with a healthy dose of social satire thrown in to give it a punch. Along the way they tackle such issues as managed care and the soaring costs of treatment, inadequate preventive medicine training, and the depersonalization of the doctor/patient relationship—serious issues which resonate with health professionals and consumers alike, yet presented with great humor and charm.

Barry Levy and Greg LaGana met in Cornell University Medical College in Manhattan in 1966, where they lived two doors apart. Recognizing they were kindred spirits, they became fast friends. It wasn't just a love of medicine, but an entire philosophy of giving back to the community that brought them together. Plus, they both loved music.

from Cornell was approaching, Levy decided to take a class at the New School for Social Research in New York City on Writing for the Musical Theater, taught by Aaron Frankel and Ken Jacobson. He asked LaGana to join him, and the next thing you know, they were wowing their fellow alumni with their irreverent view on the future of the medical field. It has only grown from there.

Levy and LaGana have performed *Damaged Care* in 26 states, for organizations including the Michigan Health

music written by Brad Ross, their New York-based musical director. Tying it all together, prolific Manhattan director Michael Schiralli molds the production into a tight, hilarious musical comedy.

Although the show tackles the tough issues in a critical way, the doctors remain optimistic about the future of medicine. Indeed, part of the impetus of the show was to spur people on toward taking a greater involvement in their health care.

"Yes," Levy says, "we all need to work together to improve health care. Access to quality health care is a right, not just a privilege for those who can afford it. Civic participation is critical. The U.S. is the richest country that has ever existed on the face of the Earth, but 40 million and counting are uninsured. That's just wrong. Discussions about 'health care reform' these days are about neither health nor caring.

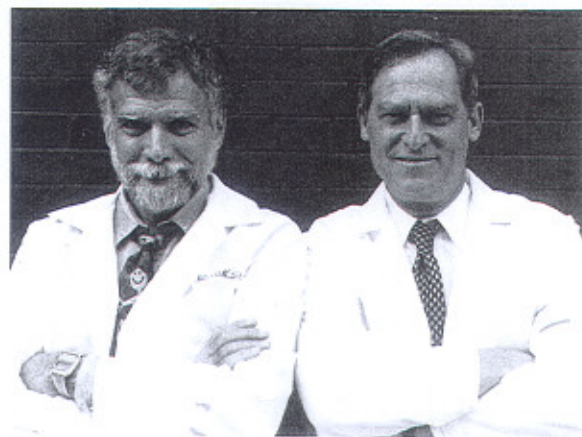


Photo by Jeffrey Swart

"Access to quality health care is a right, not just a privilege for those who can afford it."

"I wanted to be a concert pianist, but my dad went nuts," LaGana relates. So he put his ambitions to be an entertainer on hold and followed his father's advice to seek a "good, steady job." Levy played piano as a child, but his career was predestined. Family legend has it that Uncle Lou, a family physician, upon delivering Barry, announced to the anxious parents, "It's a doctor!" What choice did he have? Shelving other aspirations, Levy was inspired by his uncle's example as the kind of doctor who was "old school; still made house calls," thus fulfilling every Jewish mother's dream by becoming a doctor.

Knowing that their 25th reunion

& Hospital Association, the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston, and Physicians for a National Health Program, and in venues ranging from Las Vegas to Capitol Hill to Dillon's Restaurant and Lounge, just steps from Broadway in New York City. They combine existing songs by songwriting legends such as Stephen Sondheim and Richard Rodgers—writing parody lyrics à la *Forbidden Broadway*, such as "Have a Test" to the tune of "Be Our Guest" from *Beauty and the Beast*, "Another Outbreak of Super-Bugs" ("Another Openin', Another Show" from *Kiss Me Kate*), and "That's Cost Containment" to "That's Entertainment"—with new

They're mostly about money."

"Nobody wants to give up their share of the money pie which is over \$1 trillion a year (and counting). That's over one-seventh of the economy. If you add in all the things that contribute to ill health in this country (tobacco, fast food, alcohol, etc.), now you're talking about a hell of a lot more of the economy. So if we had true health care reform in this country, we'd wreck the economy!" adds LaGana.

They especially feel passionate about the need for doctors to reconnect to their patients in this age of depersonalized medicine. LaGana says, "We need to get back to the human

aspect: listening, observing, intuitive, more instinctual. The doctor-patient relationship is one of the most unique and intimate relationships that exists between two people. It's based on trust and trust takes time to develop. The system should be designed to foster that relationship. Instead, it's set up to drive as many wedges as possible between the doctor and the patient."

Serious issues, certainly, but that does not mean one leaves a production of *Damaged Care* in a glum mood. On the contrary, these doctors leave you laughing and inspired. They aren't afraid to pull out all the stops to get their message across, and this includes everything from playing a floppy-eared nurse dog and a jester-hat-wearing "supergerm," to demonstrating a do-it-yourself colonoscopy kit—all set to clever lyrics and songs.

It's evident that they are thoroughly enjoying every moment on stage. Consequently, the audience does, too. Not that it has always been easy. Two busy schedules mean some rather unorthodox rehearsal methods. "We rehearse by phone often. We look at our calendars and pick a time," says Levy. "Once I was in the Seattle airport during a two-hour layover, so I called Greg. There I was, singing into the phone."

"And I was pacing around the house," adds LaGana. "We have to do it a cappella (without music), which actually has helped us. Once, while performing in the Cannon Senate Office Building in Washington, D.C., the power went off, which meant the keyboard, too. We kept on going, and when the power came back on, we were right on key."

The show has reached a wide audience, mainly in medical circles. Recently featured on CNN Headline News and ABC Nightline, LaGana and Levy hope to bring their message to a much larger audience, adding, "We'd love to do a radio show, like 'Click and Clack' [the

NPR duo featured on Car Talk], or even television. It fits a specific niche, yet the appeal is universal. It crosses over."

They have done a number of shows for professional and nonprofit organizations for reduced fees or at cost, even tailoring the show to the specific needs of the host, whether it's a longer, more in-depth version, or an abbreviated show. "Whether it's our

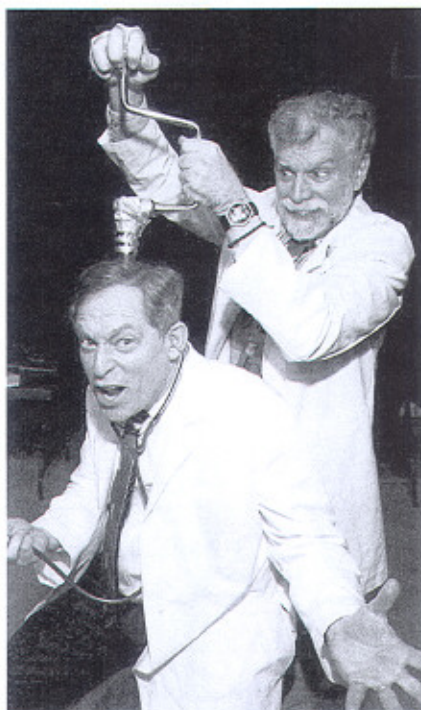


Photo by Jeffrey Swart

standard 45-minute show, or an extended or shortened version, our goal is to entertain and to get people more engaged in improving health care."

Levy and LaGana not only strive to reach others with their message through *Damaged Care*, but also exemplify the spirit of service to humanity through community-wide efforts as well. In addition to teaching and writing many papers on occupational health and public health issues, Levy has coedited books on occupational health, war and public health, terrorism and public health, and social injustice and public

health. He has raised over \$200,000 over the past 20 years for organizations involved in ending hunger and related problems in East Africa and elsewhere. He currently is a specialist in occupational and environmental medicine and an adjunct professor at Tufts University Medical School. He and his wife of 30 years, Nancy, have a daughter, Laura, and a son, Ben.

LaGana has worked as a field director for a pediatric nutrition program in Jamaica (West Indies). He participates with his wife of 35 years, Noelle, in a volunteer improvisational problem-solving theater group called the Magic Mirror Players in New Jersey, which performs free for hospitals, community service organizations, and churches. He has also designed, directed, and owned urgent-care centers in New Jersey. He is an internist at Merck Pharmaceuticals in New Jersey, and has two sons, Christopher and Marc.

Why would someone put in the long hours of medical school, leading into the long hours of a residency, only to add to their duties as a successful physician by creating and generating works that enrich the local community and the world-at-large? The answer can only be that such an individual truly cares about his fellow human beings and wants to help those less fortunate. Dr. Barry Levy and Dr. Greg LaGana are two such individuals. Whether it's through teaching and writing, through healing, or through singing and dancing in *Damaged Care*, these two friends exemplify what's right in our medical establishment. Let's hope their message of prevention, personal empowerment, and an increase in the forgotten "human touch" in medicine continues to reach and inspire a wider, more actively involved audience.

For bookings, more information, or to see clips, visit www.damagedcare.com.

[lifestyles](http://lifestyles.com)