A Horse Never Runs So Fast As When He Has Other Horses To Catch.
The Viss/Summit laser stranglehold on user fees for their lasers began to weaken last year when Nidek came on the scene with no user fees attached to their lasers. Patent litigation followed. Now the cost of surgery is going down as Viss cut their user fee from $250 to $100, and Summit is scheduled to follow suit. LaserSight Inc, based in Orlando, has stated they will decrease their user fees as well. Moreover, the competition is getting hotter due to lower fees being offered by surgeons in Canada. A trip across the 49th parallel might save hundreds. Because the procedure is considered cosmetic, no third parties are involved, and potential clients shop for laser surgery much as they do for face lifts, hair transplants, breast augmentation, and tummy tucks. The outcome is a downgrading of surgery fees with more cuts in sight, as competition continues to roar and boil. Meanwhile, lawyers are watching as the patent challenge billing hours accumulate, and laser company stocks are falling. Who would have guessed that the advent of refractive laser surgery would bring a contest resembling a demolition derby or a pack of pit bulls fighting for survival.

The White House Is Really Dull Without Monica And Hillary.
A great sigh of relief was heard when President Clinton said he is “categorically opposed to medical errors” (duh). His sudden concern relates to a study by the Institute of Medicine based upon old data collected in just three states - 98,000 hospital records in 1984 in New York and 44,000 records from Colorado and Utah in 1992. Extrapolating from these dusty figures, the Institute reported deaths due to “adverse events” somewhere between 44,000 and 98,000 nationwide per year! Even the people most closely associated with the IOM study have their doubts as to its validity and application to present medical care. But fear not, the solution offered by the big LD (lame duck), is yet another agency, the Center for Quality Improvement and Patient Safety. Do we really need yet another useless army of auditors to verify hospital reporting?!

Leadership Is The Ability To Hide Your Panic From Others.
In 1996, Aetna purchased U.S. Healthcare, its biggest HMO acquisition, and Aetna stock soared to $100 because the market believed in managed care. Now the stock is down to $40 because investors no longer believe in managed care. HMOS are moving out of the cost-control focus due to law suits, painful publicity, legislative threats, and simple exhaustion. Managed care is a doomed model because it cannot do what was claimed, that is, control costs without antagonizing its customers. Richard Huber, Aetna CEO, admits that in five or 10 years most businesses will provide employees with vouchers to buy health insurance. They will pay the difference out of their own pockets if they want gold-plated medical care, a system already pioneered by Xerox and others. The simple truth is that the public wants their doctors answering to the patient and not another master, a fact fee-for-service docs have been shouting for many years. Let’s all give ourselves a big hug and kiss.

Vice Often Rides In Virtue’s Chariot.
In 1996, the prestigious New England Journal of Medicine (NEJM) published an editorial favoring the diet drug Redux which was written by two researchers. Later it was admitted that they were paid consultants to the company that developed the medicine. Now, the current editor, Marcia Angell, (NEJM has gone feminine like the JAMA), has written a mea culpa letter to readers admitting similar violations of their own disclosure guidelines by publishing drug evaluations written by doctors with conflicts of interest. Going back to 1997, 19 instances were found in which authors received money or research support from drug companies to write articles on drug therapies. This admission comes at a critical time for the NEJM, trying hard to keep its reputation as the pre-eminent medical research publication. It was just last year that the editor was fired (his contract was “not renewed”) for opposing planned commercial ventures. It seems like only yesterday when then editor Arnold Rellman, M.D. was lecturing to doctors and the AMA about ethics. What goes around, comes around.

No Government Has Ever Been Or Ever Can Be That Does Not Have Blockheads Uppermost.
Those over-zealous fraud people with the Dept. of Health and Human Services are now looking at the rent that doctors charge medical suppliers who rent space. Inspector General June Gibbs claims she has received reports that some suppliers whose business depends on physician referrals charged excessive rent. She stated that rental in excess of the suppliers’ needs creates a presumption that the rent is actually a kickback. AMA Trustee, Timothy Flaherty, M.D., said that laws concerning rental fraud are well known to doctors, and that he sees no problem. He further advised that it “makes me a little concerned about over-aggressive prosecutors taking this report as gospel.” Does anyone ever inquire what it costs to maintain the fraud unit, how qualified are the investigators, and what kind of effect fraud accusations have upon the well being of physicians?

The Difference Between The IRS And A Taxidermist, Is That The Taxidermist Leaves The Skin.
Death and taxes - in 1993, $12.6 billion estate tax was collected, but in 1999 that increased to $27.8 billion, far beyond the administration forecast of $20 billion. GOP leaders are pressing for “death tax” relief.

State tax reduction - The strong economy shows that many states are collecting more revenue than budgeted and are planning state tax relief. Unluckily you live Hawaii - no budget surplus here.

Corporate income taxes - In 1966, corporate income tax accounted for 23% of the total, but in 1999 that figure had dropped to 10.1%.

Clinton IRS budget for 2001 - Slick Willie increased the bloated IRS budget of $8 billion by adding $769 million to hire 633 new auditors “for individual returns with over $100,000.

Simplify - All Congresspersons call for a simpler tax code, but it never happens. According to retiring New York Senator Patrick Moynihan, “in the last hours, Congress and the President sign off on a 1200 page monster: We vote for it: nobody knows what is in it.” Complexity creates large gray areas allowing IRS agents enormous discretion in interpretation. Anyone for a flat tax?

Why Does A Hearse Horse Snicker Hauling A Tobacco Executive Away?
The Justice Department has a massive civil lawsuit against the tobacco industry seeking to recover billions of dollars the government says it has spent through Medicare and other insurance programs to treat smoking-related illnesses. Defendant attorneys have moved to dismiss the case claiming that the courts have never recognized the right to recover payments made under the Medicare health program except on a case-by-case basis. The government contends that the industry conspired to mislead the public for 45 years about the dangers of tobacco. The Justice Department argues that the case is unique because these corporations for decades deliberately addicted millions of citizens. They argue that the defendants cannot rely on their products, they must rely on their advertising to make sales, and they must use the medical profession to accept their products.

Just What We Need – Professional Circling Vultures.
Ah, those creative Californians. A new business which is called Home Funeral Ministry, has developed in Sebastobol, California. Supposedly, because baby boomers are now thinking about mortality and are preoccupied with dying a “good death,” a growing group of consultants offer a new approach to the end of life. They will provide spiritually fulfilling deaths, stepping in to fill a perceived void not offered by religion, medicine, or the funeral industry. “It’s like planning a wedding, or anything else.” Courses are being offered to instruct people as professional death companions. Graduates will be called midwives for death or mentors for dying. They offer a sympathetic ear, practical advice, and assurance that they will be there at the end. Perhaps they should produce their own video and partner with the Oregon PBS-TV suicide video (Weathervane March 2000). It’s a natural. Plan your own death with choreography! Hayus Cristo, is this nuts or am I?

ADDENDA
♦ It is against the law in Rio de Janiero to dance the samba in a tunnel.
♦ Veni, vidi, Visa - We came, we saw, we went shopping.
♦ No matter how cynical I get, it’s impossible to keep up. Aloha and keep the faith —rts.