

The Boston Globe

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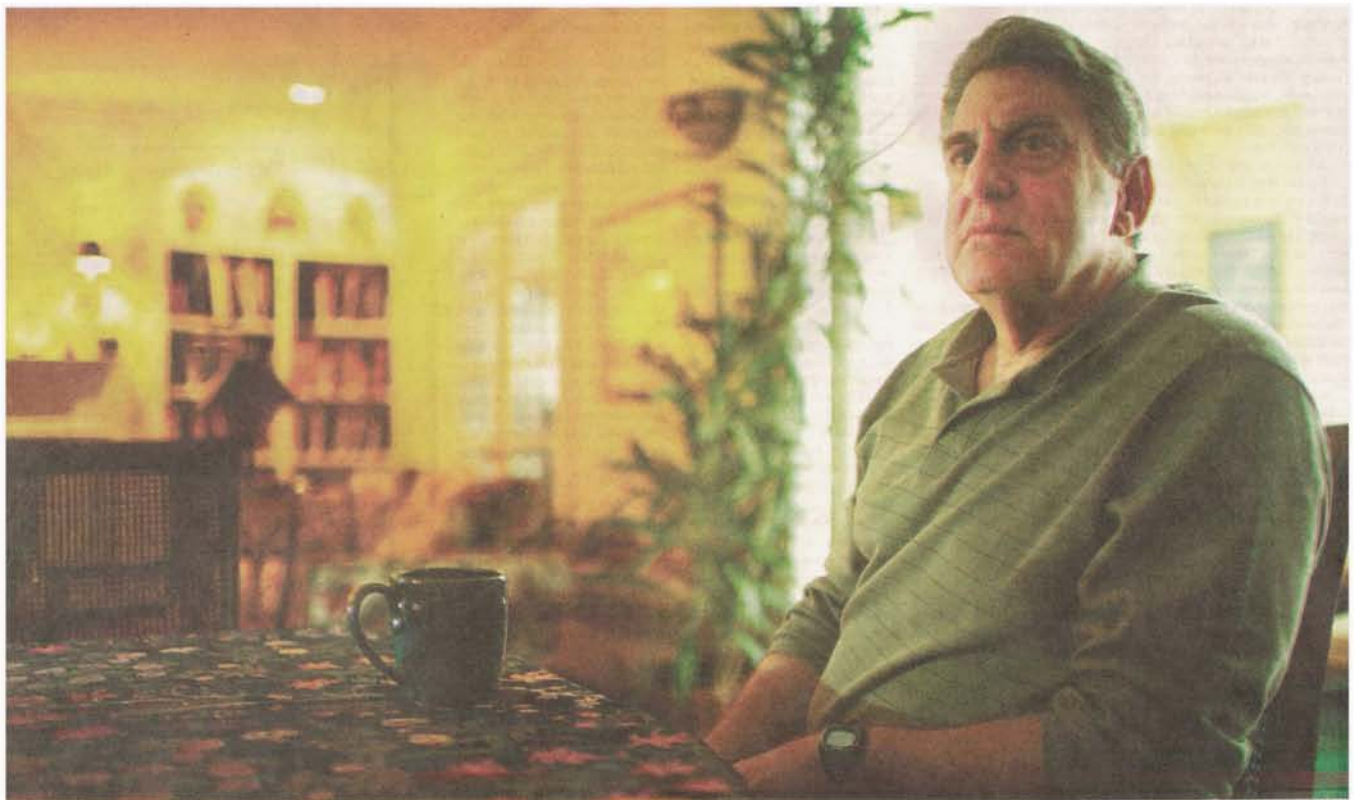
SHOVEL ALONG

TODAY: Mostly cloudy, flurries early.
High 33-38. Low 22-27.
TOMORROW: Sunny to partly cloudy.
High 34-39. Low 25-30.
HIGH TIDE: 12:23 a.m. 12:40 p.m.
SUNRISE: 6:30 a.m. SUNSET: 5:26 p.m.
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DOMINIC CHAVEZ/GLOBE STAFF

"By the end of the 1970s I was in solid recovery, and by 1981 I began to reach out to find doctors whom I could help," said Dr. Michael Palmer. "It coincided with the beginning of writing."

HEALING THYSELF

A doctor and former addict finds solace in helping others and turning some of his insight into thrillers

By David Mehegan
GLOBE STAFF

SWAMPSCOTT — Trained at Boston City and Massachusetts General hospitals, Dr. Michael Palmer began his career as an internist, became chief of medicine at Falmouth Hospital, then spent a decade as an emergency room physician. Today he's an associate director of the Massachusetts Medical Society's Physician Health Services.

What he never expected was to become sick himself. But as his career progressed, Palmer also became an alcoholic and a drug addict, was arrested, got his life together, resumed his medical practice, and dedicated himself to helping doctors in trouble. And one other thing: He published 12 best-selling thrillers. The 13th, "The First Patient," hit bookstore shelves this week.

Palmer's writing career could be a happy fairy tale, had it not started in the middle of a nightmare. His first marriage had ended in 1971. He had five knee operations, and by the late 1970s was fixing his constant pain by illegally writing prescriptions to himself. He became hooked on painkillers and was drinking heavily. In 1978 he was arrested for writing false prescriptions, was put on probation, and had to surrender his right to prescribe narcotics for two years. For nearly a year, he didn't work at all.

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PALMER'S PLOT

Listen to him read from his book at Boston.com/living

He helps other physicians turn the page

► PALMER
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"A group of doctors with problems similar to mine mentored me and helped me," he said. "By the end of the 1970s I was in solid recovery, and by 1981 I began to reach out to find doctors whom I could help. It coincided with the beginning of writing. In retrospect, having a book to write was one of the things that kept me sane."

With 10 million books in print, Palmer, 65, could easily put his medical life behind him. Yet his identity is central to his writing — all his novels have physician protagonists — and he still loves being a doctor.

"It seemed to me that I was put on earth to take care of people," he said in an interview at his ocean-side home. "That is what I should be doing, and I never got tired of it."

'He could tell a story'

Palmer, who grew up in Springfield, says he had always craved a creative outlet to balance his clinical work. He dabbled in music and theater without success. In 1977 physician Robin Cook, with whom Palmer had trained at Massachusetts General, published the best-selling "Coma," and Palmer began to think he might try fiction, too. After all, he says, "I'm a natural, verbal storyteller." While struggling against his addiction (he quit drugs and alcohol in October 1979), in 1977-78 he wrote a novel on his kitchen table — "one page a night" — and sent it off to New York literary agent Jane Berkey.

"Jane called me and said, 'Everybody here has read this book, and none of us likes it,'" said



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"It seemed to me that I was put on earth to take care of people," said Michael Palmer, a best-selling author who works with the Mass. Medical Society's Physician Health Services program.

Palmer. But then she told him, "We like your instinct. We think you can tell stories." She asked me to come to New York with a list of books I might like to write." He dashed off a list, sent it, and went to New York. "She pointed to one item — 'secret society of doctors dedicated to mercy killing' — and said, 'We like this one. Did you know that 75 percent of the people who buy fiction are women? Any way to change this to nurses?' The moment she said it, I saw the

whole book." He went home and wrote "The Sisterhood," which in 1982 became his first bestseller, and is now in its 36th printing in 35 languages.

Berkey recalls what she had seen in Palmer's first attempt, which was titled "The Corey Prescription" and was never published in the United States. "He could tell a story, and he knew about a world," she said. "His voice was authentic. He wrote with compassion about people.

He has been through adversity, and his characters have as well."

After his first book was published, Palmer left private practice to serve in the Falmouth Hospital emergency room, where he had begun volunteering with an informal group in the Massachusetts Medical Society called the Impaired Physicians Committee. Though he loved the work, he disliked the name from the start.

"You tell a doctor, 'I'm with the

Impaired Physicians program,' and he says, 'Excuse me, I'm not impaired — I'm chief of medicine at my hospital, I never miss a day of work, I'm the most beloved and referred-to doctor in the hospital,'" said Palmer. "Of course, it's true. The last thing they are going to let go of is their practice. It's what tells them they're sane. We would say, 'You haven't spoken to your kids in six weeks, you're disconnected from your wife, you're taking drugs, and you're having an affair with your nurse, and you say you're not impaired?'" In 1993, the program became an official subsidiary of the medical society, and its name was changed to Physician Health Services. Palmer left the ER and began to work with troubled doctors nearly full-time.

Debra Grossbaum, counsel for Physician Health Services, said Palmer's personal manner and experiences were powerful tools. "He is extremely effective because he connects on a very personal level, not a bureaucratic way," she said. "He can say, 'I have been there, and look what I can do.' A lot of doctors feel that it is wrong to be sick, and they need to be reminded that anyone can get sick and can get better."

The human condition

His experiences also came into his writing. Both "Miracle Cure" (1998) and "The First Patient" are about doctors with drug problems. In the latter, the drug-addicted personal physician to the US president is confronted with the sudden insanity of his sole patient. Palmer says of Dr. Gabe Singleton, "I didn't have any trouble writing him. He is me. He never took a drug that he didn't have a

symptom for. He was in complete denial that he took these drugs, because he was an addict."

"There are other medical thriller writers," said Palmer's editor, Jennifer Enderlin, vice president and associate publisher of St. Martin's Press. "What sets Michael apart is that the medical details come through in a human kind of way, not cold and clinical. He has a good understanding of the human condition."

His caretaking impulse also comes into use with his 17-year-old son, Luke, who has Asperger's syndrome, a form of autism. The boy "is doing wonderfully well," Palmer said, and will be going to college. Palmer said, "He is my reason for being."

As Palmer's audience and reputation have grown (several books have been in the top five on the New York Times bestseller list), the demand for new books has increased, which has reduced his time with Physicians Health Services. "The First Patient" is the second novel in a three-book contract, and the third is due next year.

Though not as technologically or scientifically detailed as some thrillers, Palmer's books are windows into the physician's world.

"They get into the heads of doctors," said Tess Gerritsen, a Maine-based writer of medical thrillers who, with Palmer, teaches an annual seminar for doctors who aspire to write fiction. "He gives you an idea of how doctors think and what they would do in certain situations. You'd have to be a physician to write that way."

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