

Editor's Page

Court-Jews, Court-Jesters And Court-Physicians

Only two or three centuries ago, Jews in Europe had no civil rights, and their continued physical existence depended on the protection and the patronage of benevolent princes. Fear was a constant companion, since capricious rulers often allowed anti-semitic mobs to vent a variety of hatreds on the hapless minority, thus diverting it from themselves. Some Jews were also useful to the rulers as shrewd traders and as collectors of rent. The frequent contacts with those in power gave these people an "in" that was used to plead the cause of their scattered and exposed brethren. Known as the "Court-

Jews" they had no power except their ability to ingratiate themselves, their willingness to suffer humiliation in silence and their ability to continue pleasing under very trying conditions. They were experts in survival. Although their station in life was relatively high, they had to develop the flexibility of lowly slaves. Dignity was a term that could be cherished only in secret and in hiding.



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IT WAS REFRESHING TO SEE THE AUGUST AND USUALLY HESITANT BODY OF THE M.S.M.S. HOUSE OF DELEGATES PUT ASIDE ITS NORMAL DIVISIONS AND STAND UNITED IN REJECTING THIRD-PARTY ATTEMPTS TO DICTATE MEDICAL PRACTICES IN THE GUISE OF COST CONTAINMENT. . . . THE CHOICE WAS CLEAR: TO STAND TALL . . . OR TO BECOME COURT-PHYSICIANS.

The celebrated addiction of many Jews to causes of equality, freedom and justice has other roots also, but precarious living for generations does breed a heightened

sensitivity to danger. The reflex that reacts when liberty is endangered is sometimes activated when the term "liberal" is uttered, but such annoying confusion is a small price to pay to assure one's existence.

Physicians, unlike Jews, had no reason in the past to develop a special alertness to danger, and they were almost decimated as a result. Faced with an increasingly hostile press and powerful interests out to deprive them of their freedom to practice without interference, they had, until recently, shrunk defensively and accepted their compromised position with little more than mild and pathetic protests. Many physicians have slowly and imperceptively developed a mentality not unlike that of the Court-Jews. The individual physician in private practice was no match for third parties, government and private insurance carriers, and he also learned to cower before administrative dictates of hospitals where his voice really carried little weight.

It was painful to observe the fear, the degrading and obsequious obedience and the relative absence of self respect in many deliberations, of medical societies in the recent past. We were urged to "petition," "appeal," "consult," "protest," "inform," "explain" and even "plead" as our rights as free citizens and as professionals were chipped

away without due process. We were almost willing to give up our life's work and time-honored practices because insurance commissioners, attorneys general, legislatures, and others might object. Our naivete blinded us to the fact that those in positions of power often pursued their narrow interests, not those of the public. It seemed that nothing would stop the humiliating slide and the rapid decline of the once proud profession of medicine.

The tragic role of Rigoletto, joining his detractors in laughter as they jovially go about snuffing out the life of his beloved daughter was apparently too much even for us. It was refreshing, therefore, to see the august and usually hesitant body of the MSMS House of Delegates put aside its normal divisions and stand united in rejecting third-party attempts to dictate medical practices in the guise of cost containment. Here were young physicians and old, courageously facing even the possibility of jail without flinching. These were no youthful rebels, and they had a just cause. They took their action neither lightly nor without trepidations. It was a conscious and deliberate attempt to finally resist the schemes to control the practice of medicine from the outside. The normally hesitant admitted their fears, but joined in the action. The possible charge of illegal boycott was openly considered, but in spite of understandable anxiety, not a single delegate avoided his duty and no one turned back. (Since no physician can be forced to take part in any recommended action, boycott charges may fail to hold anyway, and a court test is questionable.)

The elected delegates of the physicians of Michigan were willing to stand up defiantly in defense of their responsibility to continue serving sick people according to their medical needs and in no other way. The eyes of medical societies throughout the country were on us, and probably also the eyes of many Washington, D.C. planners. The choice was clear: To stand tall, regardless of consequences, or to become Court-Physicians. That degrading fate was not acceptable.

An old Talmudic saying claims that every generation finds the leadership it deserves. Faltering leaders are thus said to reflect a corrupt society. But the reverse is also applicable. The leadership of Michigan physicians has met its test honorably. It is now up to every physician in Michigan to follow in spite of fears and possible short-term gains. Honor is overlooked all too often these days as an essential and self-rewarding quality.

Court-Jews have been replaced by the self-assuredness and the self-respect of the Israelis. Court-jesters remain only in Grand Opera. The day of the Court-Physician is finally past too.

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