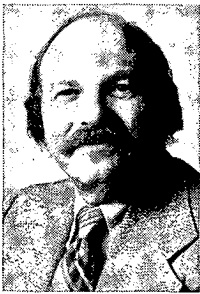


Editor's Page

Immunization Against Slavery

The 78th Legislature of the State of Michigan in its Regular Session of 1976 has just passed House Bill #6410, a copy of which has just arrived in the mail. The Bill, similar to one passed by Congress in Washington, took immediate effect for in it The People of the State of Michigan "relieve certain persons from civil liability when rendering emergency care or when participating in a mass immunization program approved by the department of public health." The short act states clearly that "any person" authorized by the director of the department of public health or a local public health officer to participate in the program without compensation, shall not be liable . . . for civil damages as a result of an act or omission which causes illness, reaction or adverse effect."



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Physicians are not even mentioned by name in the act, yet they must obviously be the ones to carry out the lion's share of the program. Three whole pages in the September 13th issue of this magazine were devoted to at least tacitly supporting this activity, which is doomed without the active participation of a large number of physicians. Again, as on numerous occasions in the past, physicians find themselves in a bind because they are, as a group, more conscientious and more concerned with the welfare of others than most people, and because they are sworn to help the sick and the injured regardless of all other considerations. Many physicians are exceptions who fall short of the ideal, but their existence only proves the rule. With such a self-image, physicians cannot easily refuse to participate in a mass immunization program without seeming, to themselves no less than to others, to be greedy, self-seeking, heartless and irresponsible.

And yet, physicians who administer the vaccine will only be protected by this act if they agree to work without any compensation. Physicians in private practice will additionally have to pay from their own pockets for all office expenses, salaries of nurses and aides, electricity and insurance. They must also absorb the cost of syringes and other supplies required to administer the vaccine and refrain from any attempt to recoup their expenses if they are not to lose even the limited protection of this act.

Is there any group of workers, anywhere in this country, who would be willing to work under these conditions? The question requires no answer. The mere asking provides it.

The time is finally at hand for physicians to unequivocally state that while they still accept, as always, the responsibility to render emergency and life-saving services to any individual in need, they will no longer allow the ethical precepts of their own profession to be used against them. The Human decency and professional responsibility of physicians have been used for too long as levers to invoke guilt and thus insure physicians' participation in good as well as in bad programs. Preventive medicine measures such as immunization, and even the administration of routine medical care do not have the high priority that others want us to believe they have. Physicians, too, have the right to decide under which conditions they will work, and under which they will not. Physicians are workers, too, and they are entitled to the same rights of others working for a living, even if they still lack the power of organized labor.

The issue is not one of money, although everybody involved with this program besides the physicians is on some payroll. That is true for the public health director on top and for the lowliest technical aide. Physicians generally earn a good living and as people they should give generously and freely of their time and of their resources. But no one has the right to *expect* that they give, simply because they are physicians.

Since House Bill #6410 does not recognize the right of the physician to be paid for his work while having reasonable protection under the law, *physicians should not participate in the program*, whose real value and wisdom are seriously questioned anyhow. Popularity contests may be lost this way, but the battle for the survival of sanity, fairness and the continued existence of a self-respectful medical profession might yet be won. Legislators and bureaucrats might inadvertently be reminded by such action that slavery has really been abolished, and that, contrary to expectations and to their own past behavior, physicians are free men, too.

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