

Editorial

Outside Pressure, Inside Damage

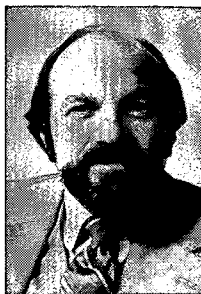
What happens to people living in the shadow of a great dam that shows the first signs of cracking? The sense of helplessness and horror in the face of impending disaster was described by this writer in a recent editorial, "The Distrust of Authority," (*Detroit Medical News*, June 19, 1978). Mass-denial is the usual mode of coping with approaching calamity. Life goes on as if nothing is about to happen. Sanity, in effect, is sacrificed so that life can go on in the meantime. Others, driven by panic, become busy with frantic but fruitless activity. Those with clear vision grab whatever few belongings they can and rush to the hills.

Many physicians have similarly been affected by the recurrent and sometimes vicious attacks upon the profession in general. Although seemingly unaware or uninvolved in the political struggles, many physicians are deeply affected by the ugly and tense atmosphere and by the repeated attempts at character assassination. They deny the problem, yet apathy characterizes their professional lives. Patients, on the other hand, sadly discover how difficult

and often impossible it is to find a physician who takes the time to treat them humanely and calmly. The old traditions of Medicine and of dignified and deliberate patient-care do not flourish well under the clouds of distrust. The symptoms are treated but the patient ignored, his time regarded without care, his anxieties often overlooked.

In Michigan alone thousands of physicians have begun to busy themselves with a variety of basically fruitless activities, giving up direct patient care. They are planning new health agencies and assuring quality, measuring outcomes and tabulating lengths of stay, supervising and evaluating charts and "performance," reviewing, checking, monitoring, organizing and re-organizing—all on some public payroll. A whole army of non-physician helpers, advisors, assistants and "experts" is also involved. When the hard labor and the expensive efforts are summed up, the health of the population is hardly improved, costs have gone up rather than down, and the scarcity of good physicians has become more pressing.

And what about those taking to the hills? Seizing what may be the last opportunity, some physicians grab as much as they can and milk their practices very hard, just before the cow is about to die. The only satisfaction left for many in the practice of medicine is the financial return, and they seek that satisfaction with a single-minded avidity. The real joy that was always integral to the practice of medicine, namely, the opportunity to make meaningful contact with other human beings and to give of one's self, has been lost. The tragic paradox of the situation is ignored: the more physicians are attacked, the more of them break under the pressure and join the ranks of the grabbers. Physicians are human, too, and like others, they have frailties, weaknesses and fears. Not being Supermen, the degrading of the physician's image by government and by the media brings the worst out in the behavior of some.



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Living in close proximity to the daily carnage of war exacts a high price even from those not directly involved in the fighting. A human cannot perform his duties unless he becomes insensitive to the dying. Survival in political battle is also not without a price. Cynicism and insensitivity often linger even when they are not needed. Whatever happens to Medicine as a result of future legislation, some of the damage is already evident in the present. The dedication, compassion and good-will of many physicians have already been victimized. Angry "reformers" have already succeeded in achieving the opposite of their proclaimed goals: costs are higher, the doctor-patient relationship is barely surviving and medical care is less humane than ever.

The rabbis of old, in their wisdom, told us that "When Man is absent—then it is incumbent upon *you* to be human." We may not succeed in reversing the insane trends of our time, but we still have the *freedom* and the *responsibility* to live our individual lives with integrity.

Postscript:

The enemies of reason may wish to use some statements of this article out of context, to prove that Medicine is not perfect. The likely results from doing so would probably be:

1. Self-criticism and self-correction of abuses will become even rarer than they are.
2. Cynicism will increase and bitterness will spread even more.

Thus, they will further their cause of irresponsibility and unreason, all in the name of protecting the patient and lowering the cost of medical care.

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