

Editorial

The Distrust Of Authority

Medicine is being ground to dust by forces that are far greater than any single profession, even one as hallowed and respected as ours. These forces, if not checked by yet unseen countervailing pressures, will do more than just destroy the private practice of Medicine. The very continued existence of a free society in which individuals have not only rights but also responsibilities is at stake. We may well be witnessing the last few decades of Western civilization as we know it. The horror is especially diabolical since the methodical stamping out of individualism is carried out in the name of extending freedom and under the flag of fighting injustice.

The Drug Regulation Reform Act of 1978, which is the current battleground in the overall attack upon the medical profession, is best recognized in this context. Authority as such is distrusted and often believed to be inherently evil. Authoritativeness is regularly suspect and confused with authoritarianism. Physicians simply serve as convenient targets for "kicks" intended for all authority. At the next historical juncture, maybe just a few short years away, after Medicine as a profession of independent practitioners will have been destroyed, other groups and institutions will take our place. President Carter may now engage in cheap attacks upon physicians, but the Presidency as such is also in danger. So are most institutions of power in this society.

The basic assumption of the consumer movement is that someone is always out to get the hapless individual and to take advantage of him. Eager reporters flood newspapers, journals and television programs with endless stories of wife beatings and child abuse, unfair employment practices and patient mis-management, financial shenanigans and many schemes of swindlers. Is our society really so much more corrupt than all previous ones?

The population is being sensitized to experience and to discover real and imagined injustices of all kinds, and is encouraged to seek "justice" from abusers. Ralph Nader and the many good but troubled people who rallied to his cause have fomented an atmosphere of class struggle, no less destructive than the one envisioned in the writings of Karl Marx. An ugly atmosphere of "dog-eat-dog" prevails in widespread parts of our country. It has replaced the neighborly, simple, friendliness that can sometimes still be found in smaller communities.

The Drug Regulation Reform Act of 1978 aims at "protecting" the poor patient from his physician, who is assumed to be not only imperfect but also scheming and evil in design. How else does one explain regulations which threaten physicians with imprisonment of up to three years and/or fines of up to \$25,000.00 for the "offense" of



DR. BAR-LEVAV

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failing to inform patients of potential prescription risks (as defined by the FDA)? Placing themselves above suspicion, hordes of holier-than-thou bureaucrats, not sworn by a Hippocratic oath and guided not by human suffering and pain but by printed regulations, set themselves out to protect the patient from the evil doctor. And so it goes.

My good friend Dr. John Slevin, in an editorial of May 29, 1978, encourages physicians to write to congressmen and senators in opposition to this Act. So does our Medical Society. The president of MSMS, our Dr. Louis Heideman, urges physicians to speak to one patient each day and point out the issues that face us. They and others, having been raised in a tradition of reason, recommend actions that make sense in a system of rationality.

But, as a society, we seem to have opted for an existence that permits unreason, tolerates irrationality and rewards the absence of self-restraint. Reasonable efforts of reasonable men and women no longer seem to do much good. With horror we may have to realize that even unreasonable steps may not be powerful enough to stem the tide.

R. Pan-Lerman, M.D.