



Eric Zorn

# Chicagoland

Chicago Tribune Sunday, April 5, 1992

## Medical pioneer's torch flickers out

In the last gasp of "The Doctor's People," a two-fisted little newsletter that just published its final issue, is a cry of triumph.

"The truth about medicine is now there for all to see," writes editor Vera Chatz in her valedictory column. "Few young people tremble as their parents did at the very thought of questioning their doctors."

The Evanston-based monthly was small—usually eight typewritten pages—but never humble; always bold, often controversial and, by some lights, occasionally wrong. When it began in the mid-1970s, it was called "The People's Doctor" and contained the iconoclastic proclamations of Dr. Robert Mendelsohn, a renegade pediatrician who brashly questioned much of conventional medical wisdom.

In the first issue alone he cast doubt on weight-gain limits and tranquilizers for pregnant women, birth control pills, dental X-rays, routine episiotomies and fetal monitoring.

"It all sounds mainstream today, but the way Bob attacked sacred cows was radical in the '70s," said Lynne McTaggart, editor of the London-based and Mendelsohn-inspired newsletter "What Your Doctors Don't Tell You." "He was the first MD to come out and advocate challenging your doctor," McTaggart said. "In that way, he really started medical consumerism."

McTaggart was the Tribune editor in charge of the short-lived syndicated newspaper column Mendelsohn wrote with the help of writer Chatz, his longtime neighbor, and said she remembers editors at other newspapers being frightened to print his broadsides at the medical establishment.

"Back then, Bob was a lone voice from a very, very sick profession," said Charles Inlander, president of the People's Medical Society in Allentown, Pa.

Since 1983, Inlander's society has published an influential health newsletter that, like "Second Opinion" and other myth-wrecking publications, has roots in the consumer awakening of the mid-'70s in which Mendelsohn was so prominent. "Bob gave credibility to what a lot of patients always felt," Inlander said. "Bob told us, 'Doctors lie.'"

On the strength of Mendelsohn's books, such as "Confessions of a Medical Heretic" (1979) and "Male Practice, How Doctors Manipulate Women" (1981), and his frequent media appearances, the circulation of "The People's Doctor" grew to 7,000. Some of his views were and remain highly suspect—his call for a quarantine of AIDS patients and his attack on mass childhood immunization, for example—but the tenor of his approach to medical shibboleths became widely accepted and practiced.

He died four years ago Sunday at age 61. Chatz kept his mission alive by flip-flopping the name of the newsletter and creating a large advisory board of doctors who had admired Mendelsohn's work. She didn't even miss a month.

The first issue of "The Doctor's People" was a provocative look at the possibility that the prescription drugs Winnetka schoolhouse killer Laurie Dann had been taking triggered her violent rampage.

When the Tribune picked up the story, Chatz was angry that its article did not credit "The Doctor's People." But the omission was, in fact, a compliment of a sort—after Mendelsohn, and in no small measure thanks to him, skeptical, investigative medical reporting had become commonplace in the mainstream media.

"We sort of made ourselves obsolete," said Chatz, sitting at a desk in the three-room office at 1578 Sherman Ave. in downtown Evanston out of which she and business partner Reva Pauker have been running the tiny operation. "Magazines and newspapers are doing such a good job reporting the dangers of things like breast implants, Prozac and Halcion that I'm quoting them now."

Monthly circulation of the \$2 newsletter dwindled to 3,000, and Chatz, 56, said she began losing money on "The Doctor's People." She finally sold her subscribers list to another health newsletter and mailed out her "So long, friends" issue in mid-March.

Copies of that issue took up the last remaining inch of shelf space in the office storage room into which Chatz will move the surviving mail-order business for back issues and books at the end of the month.

"I'm very sorry it's folding," said Rita Mendelsohn, the doctor's widow and a Northwestern University administrative assistant. "But it's the same sorrow you feel when your kid goes off to college. This is the end of an era, but it seems about right."