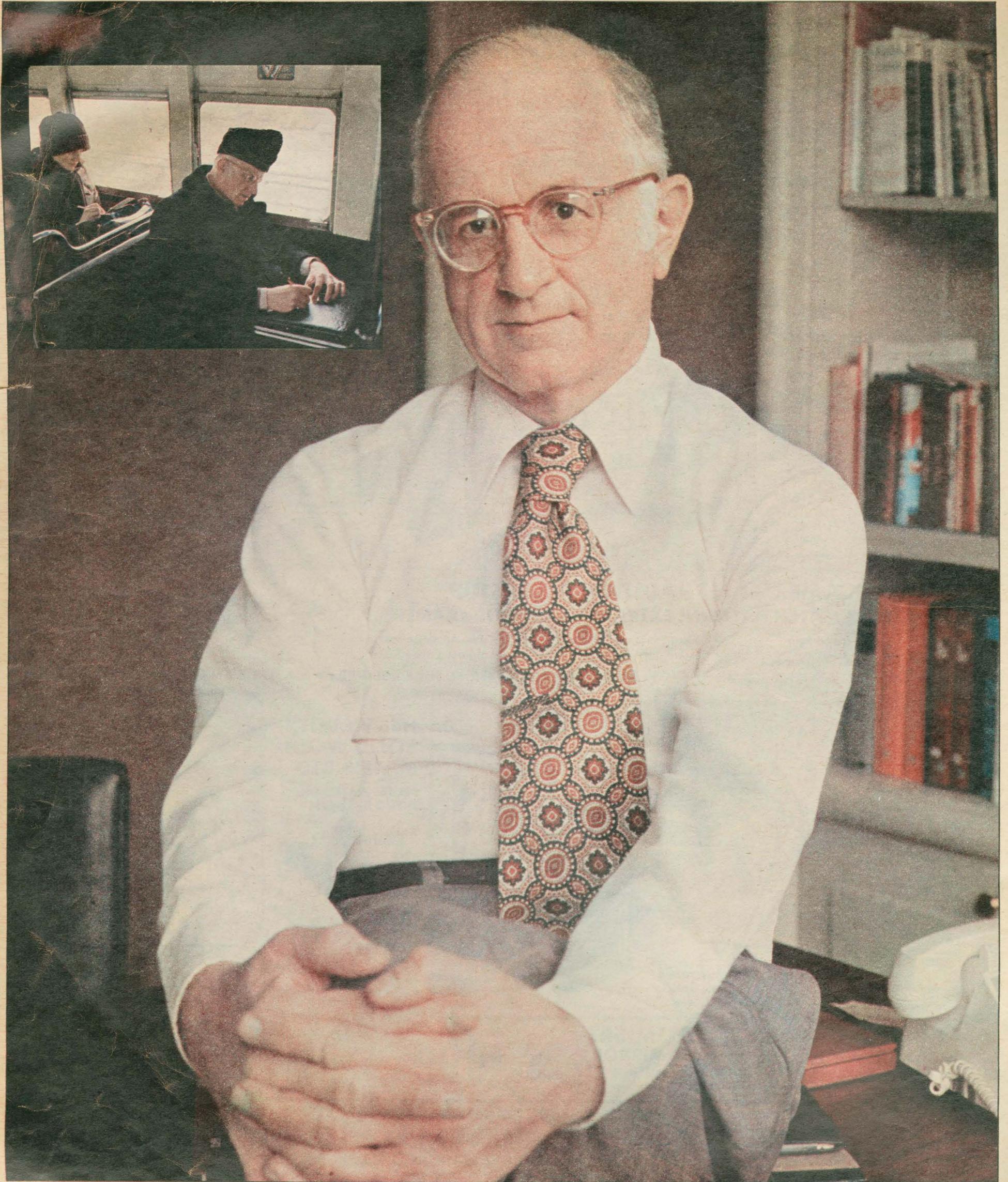


**CONFESSIONS
OF A MEDICAL
HERETIC**

CHICAGO STYLE



ROBERT MENDELSON: CHICAGO'S MEDICAL MAVERICK

By Barbara Varro

SOME OF his peers consider him the Ayatollah Khomeini of medicine, but Dr. Robert S. Mendelsohn neither looks nor acts like a fanatical revolutionary.

Mendelsohn, a board-certified Chicago pediatrician and chest specialist known for his consumer-oriented stance, has gained a reputation as a medical heretic in recent years. The label doesn't bother him. In fact, his pride in the description prompted him to use it in the title of his book, "The Confessions of a Medical Heretic," which details his beliefs.

"I see modern medicine as the church, doctors as priests, procedures as sacraments, payment as penance," says Mendelsohn, with evangelical fervor. "Where did the shah of Iran go for sanctuary? To the church of modern society—the hospital. Until we recognize medicine as church, there is no dealing with it. It is a belief system in which heretics are not looked upon kindly."

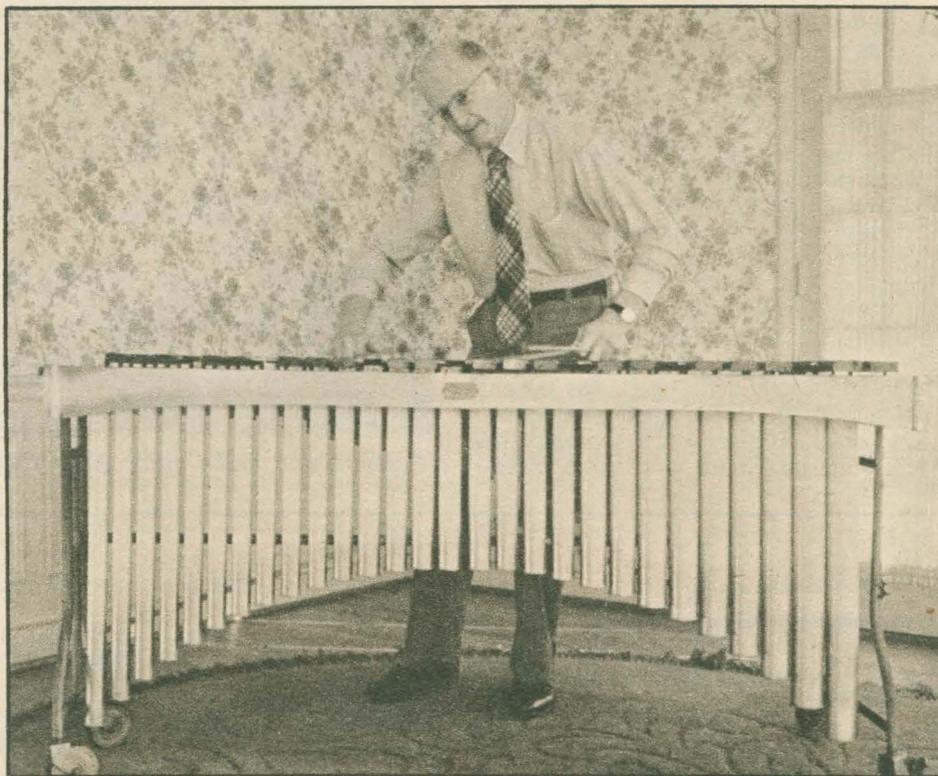
Some of Mendelsohn's heresies: encouraging erosion of the public's faith in doctors; protesting unnecessary surgery; questioning over-reliance on technology and drugs; promoting home birth and making mothers who don't breast-feed feel guilty about it.

"It would be foolish for the public to take him too seriously," says a Chicago doctor, who dismisses Mendelsohn as a traitor to his profession. "He is prone to overstatement."

Dr. Warren Pearse, executive director of the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, which views having babies at home as dangerous, said, "Mendelsohn has commented that the maternal and infant death rate hasn't changed much since the 1920s [with majority of births taking place in hospitals since that time]." Pearse said, "To say that the death rates have not changed in 50 years is not only absurd. It is totally inaccurate."

Mendelsohn's book was unfavorably reviewed in the *Journal of the American Medical Assn.* (for whom he co-authored the official handbook on mental retardation). *Journal* editor Dr. William Barclay wrote: "This is . . . a collection of opinions, only some of which are reliable. Most physicians will find much in here with which to agree, but also a great deal to take exception [to]. This book will be read by many patients who may subsequently confront their physicians with some rather unusual demands and accusations."

Criticism doesn't faze Mendelsohn: "My doctor friends tell me, 'Bob, we know that everything you say in the book is true, but why didn't you keep it in a medical journal instead of spreading it before the public?' My answer to them



Dr. Gadfly would be an appropriate nickname for Robert Mendelsohn, medical heretic who plays the xylophone and rides the elevated to work.

is—it is the public's right to be informed."

Mendelsohn's appearance gives no hint of his rebellious spirit. This relaxed, witty man of 53 is very much at ease with himself. He is the picture of the kind family doctor of long ago: balding with an open, intelligent face and kind eyes framed by pale-rimmed glasses. He is tall and trim, which, he says, is a result of good nutrition and playing tennis twice a week.

A family man, Mendelsohn and his wife, Rita, live a quiet life in a comfortable home in Evanston where he often relaxes by playing the xylophone. Last year, his daughter, Ruth, gave birth (at home, by the way) to the Mendelsohns' first grandchild, a girl, Channa. Another daughter, Sally, is a registered nurse in Washington, D. C., where she frequently assists birth deliveries in the home. The fire in this gentle rabble rouser is stoked whenever he talks about the current state of medicine. "In spite of its image of success, modern medicine is losing its adherence. It is being recognized as an idolatrous religion. So, it is time for a new religion."

New medicine, as Mendelsohn envisions it, will not be based on a futuristic projection but on a journey back in time to the way it was. "Medicine today is endangering us by making us submit to procedures that can be bad for us, such as X-rays. I just want to see a return to some of the old ways of doing things."

He proposes:

- Stopping medical abuse of women by sexist doctors. "It begins with gynecology and obstetrics: problems with the

Pill and the fact of unnecessary Caesarean sections. It goes on to include problems with hormones given to post-menopausal women; radical mastectomies and complications from the synthetic estrogen DES [diethylstilbestrol] given to women in the 50s to prevent miscarriage, some of whom subsequently gave birth to daughters who contracted vaginal cancer.

"Women make seven times as many visits to doctors as men. Someone pointed out that the major medical transaction in this country involves a male doctor giving a mood-modifying drug (usually Valium) to a female patient."

- That more women give birth in the home: "I've been called a child abuser by a doctor who equates home birth with child abuse. That is absurd. Most pregnancies are not complicated and most babies can be delivered safely at home. I'm for returning deliveries of babies back to the midwives. In many countries where deliveries are done by midwives, the infant and maternal mortality rate is lower than ours."

- Making mothers who don't breast-feed their infants feel guilty: "Guilt is one of the doctor's most effective tools. Doctors use it with cigarette smokers all the time. It's about time to use it with breast-feeding. The fact is that some infant formulas can be dangerous to the health of children. Yet, for years many doctors have been using perverted logic by telling mothers that while breast-feeding is best, bottle-feeding is just as good."

- Eroding public faith in physicians: "We have to continue to erode the confi-

dence that people have in their doctors because much of medicine today has become counterproductive. A case in point: a recent report in *Medical World News* revealed that the angiogram tests to determine whether a person needs a coronary bypass are misinterpreted about one-third of the time. What that means is that surgeons may be doing bypasses on people who don't need them; they may not be doing them on those who do.

"Doctors in general should be treated with about the same degree of trust as used car salesmen. The idea of having blind faith in what the doctor prescribes has to stop. Doctors must learn to share the available information with patients. In the case of drugs, for instance, a patient should know exactly what it does and its potential harm."

- Eliminating unnecessary surgery: "One of the doctor's duties is to protect patients against the surgeon. People should be encouraged to obtain second and third opinions before they submit to surgery. For instance, the rate of Caesarean sections [which used to be done only in extreme cases] is now 50 per cent or more in some hospitals."

"The fact that unnecessary surgery is being performed is well documented by government studies. [A congressional investigation revealed that 2.4 million unnecessary operations were performed in this country in 1974, costing \$3.9 billion and resulting in 11,000 deaths]."

- Questioning over-reliance on technology: "The illusion in medicine is that of progress. The reality is that of increased technologic application of unproved techniques. Technology has been misused. Medical testing laboratories are scandalously inaccurate. Coronary bypasses are certainly controversial. Doctors don't approach radiation therapy with the kind of caution it deserves. X-rays can do a lot of harm. A Johns Hopkins Medical Center study showed that the birth of babies with Down's Syndrome born to older mothers was closely related to the amount of diagnostic and therapeutic medical and dental X-rays they were exposed to in their lives."

- Spotlighting what hospitals and doctors are doing: "Hospitals talk about all of the procedures they do but nobody discusses the outcomes. The Department of Public Health should supply reports to the newspapers on how many people died because of such things as unnecessary surgery and adverse drug reactions in hospitals. The public should know that most drug-related deaths are due to medication that is doctor-prescribed."

The new era in medicine, according to Mendelsohn, will be spawned by a new breed of doctor. He sees the new doctor as more humane and less like an unfeeling robot produced by a supertechnological age.

But where will these new doctors come from? They, he says, are being

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Mendelsohn

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trained in some of the medical schools in the country that are putting more focus on the human factor. They are learning the art of medicine from teachers such as Mendelsohn, who is an associate professor of preventive medicine at the University of Illinois.

"My young male and female students are more radical than I," he said. "They are eager to return to some of the old ways to become humane doctors. Many of today's doctors are not the most exemplary role models. There is a high rate of impaired physicians today—those addicted to alcohol or drugs—and the divorce rate among doctors is extremely high."

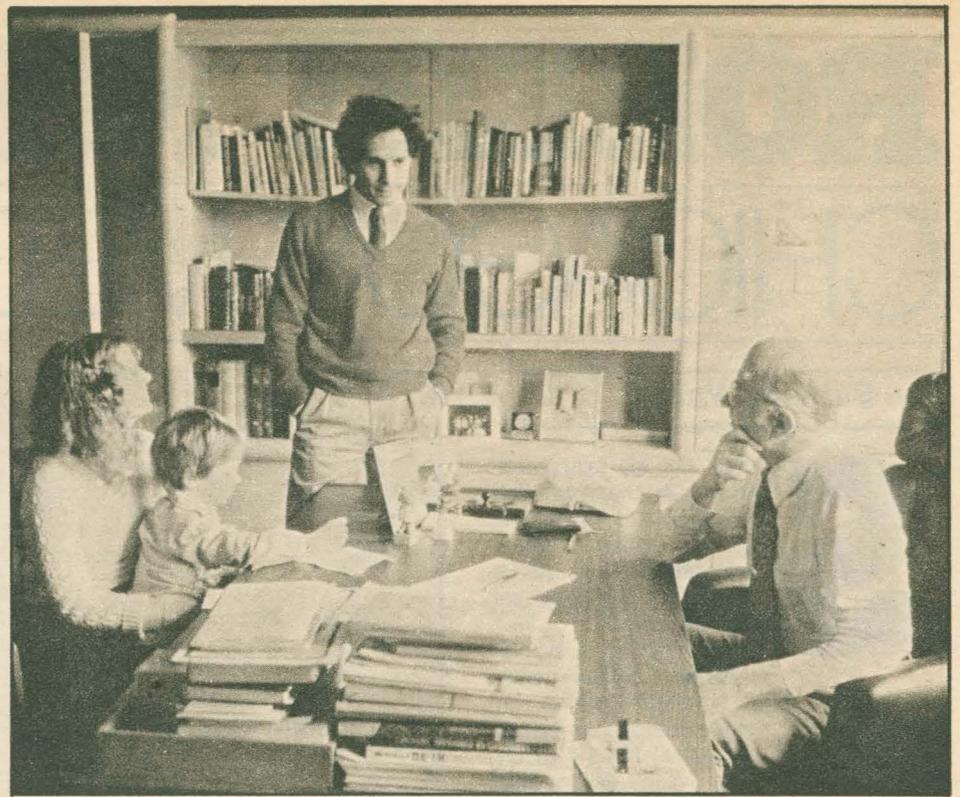
The new doctors, according to Mendelsohn, may even reinstate house calls. "Medicine changed when doctors stopped making house calls. Until then, a doctor was a guest in a patient's home so he was not apt to be so arrogant."

What led Mendelsohn to become a medical heretic? After all, he comes from a conventional Chicago background. He did both his undergraduate

and graduate work at the University of Chicago. He served his internship at Cook County Hospital and his pediatric residency at Michael Reese Medical Center. Later, he attended the Institute for Psychoanalysis child-care training and he took courses in chest diseases to become certified in that field.

"When I think back on my medical career," he said, "I feel that I began to turn around in the '60s, when I was the national director of the medical consultation service for Project Headstart. That was a turning point for me because I came to the realization that you couldn't make poor people healthy by giving them medicine. The biggest problem among the poor at that time was iron deficiency, and I had been trained in the conventional way to treat it with supplementary iron.

"We—1,600 American pediatricians—literally gave supplementary iron to hundreds of thousands of kids in the country. And, would you believe, none of the numbers changed. I found out the reason why: You have to approach deficiency nutritionally. Giving iron to those who are acutely deficient [in the mineral] turned out to be counterproductive. The supplementary iron irritates the gastrointestinal tract and causes bleed-



Patients who make office visits find Mendelsohn in shirtsleeves.

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ing in children who are malnourished. Bad nutrition was the root cause. Those kids didn't have proper diet. But the doctors were not trained in nutrition."

Mendelsohn is angered by the fact that nutrition is virtually disregarded in many medical schools. "Most schools don't do a good job of training in that area. Many medical students and doctors don't want to be bothered with it, although they know that proper nutrition is vital to health."

The use of drugs during pregnancy is another practice that raises Mendelsohn's hackles. "The amount of drugs given in pregnancy is increasing every year," he said with disgust in his voice. "Pills are given out unnecessarily for nausea, morning sickness and weight reduction."

He has high praise for members of La Leche League International (an organization of women who encourage breastfeeding): "They are the healthiest bunch of women I know because they guard against unnecessary medication and they pay attention to nutrition, which has a beneficial effect on them as well as their children."

Another Mendelsohn complaint against doctors is focused on what he terms their anti-family attitudes. Some

years ago, the feisty Mendelsohn won a fight at one hospital to allow a mother to stay with her child after visiting hours. He had told the woman she could stay after the 7:30 p.m. curfew, but the nurses on the floor complained.

"The hospital administrator told me he was calling a policeman to escort her out," Mendelsohn recalled. "And I told him that I would call a TV station to film the eviction. The outcome of that confrontation was that he backed off."

While Mendelsohn attacks some practices of the medical establishment, he does not believe that most doctors are charlatans who would do anything to make a buck. "Most doctors," he said, "do what they do out of a belief that what they are doing is right because that is the way they were trained."

He recalls his own trust in the system as a young resident: "When I took my residency at Michael Reese in the '50s, I learned to give X-ray treatment for throat ailments. Then in the late '60s and early '70s, some of the patients I had treated began to come back to me with cancer of the thyroid gland. As a resident, it never occurred to me to question the technique they taught me. But that incident shows that what may be considered beneficial at one time can

prove to be harmful later. So it is vital for doctors to question what they are told to do."

LIKE OTHERS who attack revered institutions, Mendelsohn is often asked why he doesn't simply leave medicine if he doesn't like the way things are done. He replies that because he loves it he wants to bring about changes that will make the medical profession better.

Is that egocentric of him? "Someone might say that," he conceded. "But I would like to think that I'm speaking up out of motives that have nothing to do with personal glory. I know this is going to sound arrogant, but I think of myself as a Martin Luther type. While he left Roman Catholicism, he did not leave the Christian church. I have no intention of leaving medicine. There are many doctors who agree with me. I get letters from hundreds of closet medical heretics."

He spreads his gospel via medical journals and a monthly newsletter, "The People's Doctor." He also writes a health column that appears in 20 newspapers (he wrote for the Chicago Daily

News until it folded in 1978).

How will the area of health change in the decade to come?

"I think the public will become increasingly inquisitive about the quality of care they receive from doctors and hospitals. Doctors will have to be more cautious with regard to X-rays, which are currently used ritualistically for treatment and diagnostic tests. People will pay closer attention to proper nutrition. More babies will be born at home and more people will have the option of dying at home instead of in a hospital."

A decade or two ago, Mendelsohn's dissenting voice might have been disregarded by the public, and it may have been stifled by the medical establishment. But we are living in a different world today. "Watergate and the public's protest of the war in Vietnam has changed people," Mendelsohn points out. "Those two events caused the public to be skeptical of powerful institutions. They made the public realize that they can question those in power and they can bring about change. Now, when someone like me takes potshots at the establishment, I'm not considered a nut. A lot of people out there are listening."

Barbara Varro is a Sun-Times reporter.



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