

A medical heretic who'll be missed

Dr. Robert S. Mendelsohn, the Evanston medical maverick who died last week, apparently from a heart attack, described modern medicine as a religion, with doctors playing the roles of priests.

The self-proclaimed medical heretic's point was that virtually all practices in modern medicine were based on faith, rather than science.

It seems appropriate that he died at home because this doctor's advice to patients so often was to stay out of hospitals. He called hospitals "temples of doom," since so many mishaps occurred within their walls.

Dr. Mendelsohn, who hit the national consciousness in 1979 with his best-selling book, *Confessions of a Medical Heretic*, often warned that the wonders of "medical science" would turn out to be disasters rather than miracles. Like a Biblical prophet, the devout Jew would predict what would go wrong with the latest "breakthrough" in drugs or surgery. He often was right on target.

Dr. Mendelsohn was an outcast in polite medical circles. Mainstream practitioners didn't like the way he would take their own studies to point up dangers in medical practices. They didn't like the fact that he testified against them in malpractice cases.

Doctors tried to bring him up on charges before the local medical society for his heretical ideas, such as opposing childhood immunizations. Doctors elsewhere organized committees to try to remove his syndicated column, the "People's Doctor," from papers in their communities.

Still, he endured. He paved the way for other medical heretics to speak out on the dangers of modern medicine. Dr. Mendelsohn even organized a conference of dissenters in Chicago in 1984.

Now, I'm a bit prejudiced when it comes to Bob Mendelsohn. As a journalist-in-residence at the University of Michigan 10 years ago, I first became acquainted with his column. In fact, my wife, Judi, and I brought along some of Dr. Mendelsohn's

columns as talking points when we interviewed pediatricians.

I came to know him soon after I started at the **Chicago Sun-Times**. We got together regularly. He often sent me tips.

Personally, my wife and I were influenced by his views. In part due to him, we decided to have our son David at home rather than go into the hospital, where we would have had little control over the birth. In large measure, because of Bob Mendelsohn, Chicago is one of the few cities where there is a corps of physicians doing home births.

Patient pressure triggered by Dr. Mendelsohn has led to efforts to make safer childhood vaccines. He raised questions about the "epidemic" of cesarean sections in this country, and doctors and insurers finally are taking steps to stop unnecessary operations.

This is not to say that Dr. Mendelsohn was always right. He was so distrustful of other physicians that he had a tendency to recommend the opposite of whatever the establishment urged. (A chapter in one of his books was entitled: "If This Is Preventive Medicine, I'll Take My Chances with Disease.")

But he was always in the trenches, questioning the medical establishment.

One striking example in recent years was his call for AIDS patients to be quarantined. As was typical with Bob, he pleased and he antagonized many people with one broad sweep.

Dr. Mendelsohn's critics failed to understand the important role he played as a devil's advocate in the House of Medicine. Society needs the gadflies, the mavericks, the dissenters, the doubters to challenge the true believers. Ultimately, the truth, whatever it may be, will prevail.

Dr. Mendelsohn, the medical heretic, will be missed. Let's hope the tradition will continue.

HEALTH & MEDICINE



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