

N A P E R V I L L E

CITY★STAR



a Copley Newspaper

Volume 3, No. 3 — Distributed every week in the greater Naperville area — October 5-11, 1989

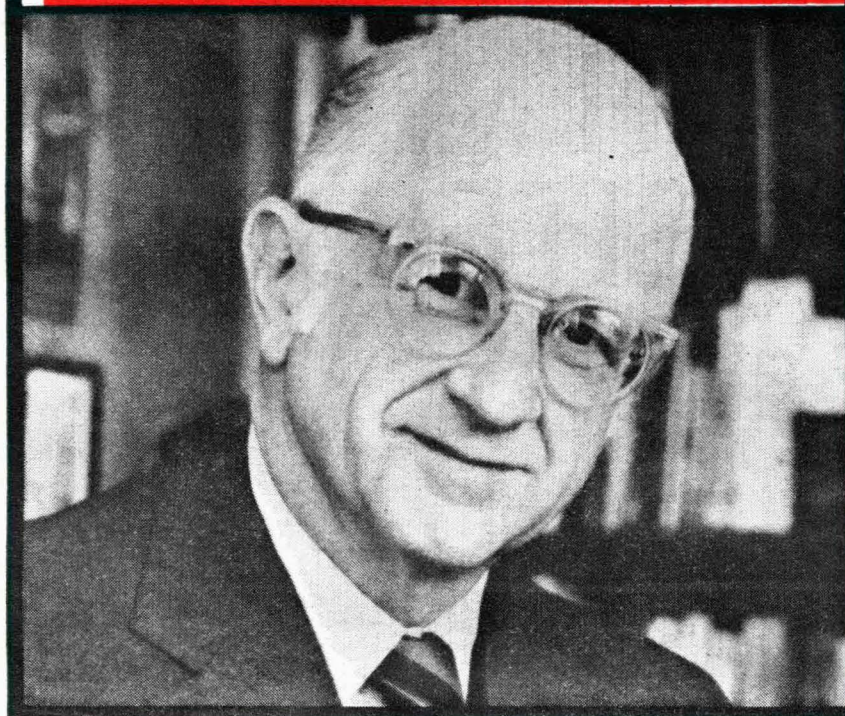


H
E
A
V
Y

P
E
T
T
I
N
G

P. 11

THE MEDICAL HERETIC P. 7



'OH' MR. DYLAN P. 14

The death and life of a medical heretic

When the letter arrived from my daughter's school nurse, I thought first of Vera Chatz: she is the only person alive who could truly understand.

"Dear Mr. and Mrs. McGrath, We have spoken of Molly's immunization status several times . . ." it began. "I am sure you are aware there has been a sharp rise in measles in the Chicago area. . . . I am concerned for Molly. . . . It is at this time I am requesting her immunizations to be brought in compliance with the state required school mandate."

I have declined the shots for my daughter for years. When people ask why, I could go into this study or that study, this book or that, this evidence or that evidence, this reason or that. But there is really only one reason that I don't believe they are a good thing: Dr. Robert S. Mendelsohn, the most vociferous medical critic who ever lived — physically dead since April 5, 1988, but still very much alive through the spirit and hard work of Vera Chatz.

In 1972, journalist Vera Chatz, her attorney husband, Jimmy, and her two sons moved to a stately home on Ridge Avenue in north suburban Evanston. Behind a black wrought iron fence stood six homes built around a common driveway. Directly across from the Chatzes lived Bob Mendelsohn, his wife, Rita, and their two daughters. He was a well-known pediatrician who was soon to become one of the most controversial physicians of all time. The Chatz and Mendelsohn families became close friends, and Vera came to know Bob as a special person and a gifted thinker. In 1976, Chatz, a prolific freelance writer, had an idea for an advice column for senior citizens.

"Editors aren't interested in old people who don't buy things," a friend in the syndication business told her. "Health columns. That's what sells. Don't you know a doctor?"

Of course she did — and what a doctor he was! He had already begun to go against the grain of traditional medical practice in journal articles, in stands he had taken against hospitals and the way they did things (like the time he called columnist and talk show host Irv Kupcinet when a mother was denied access to her ailing child after visiting hours at a local hospital), and in his own thriving practice.

He had already created waves of controversy in jobs he held as head of the children's hospital at Michael Reese; at the University of Chicago; at the University of Illinois and Northwestern medical schools; on the State of Illinois medical licensing committee (where Chatz also served as the

only "consumer" member ever); as the local head of Head Start; and as the creator of a handbook on mental retardation in which he blamed physicians for most cases.

He was becoming a maverick — and unknown to most people, he was also coping with diabetes.

Chatz, the writer, and Mendelsohn, the doctor, together sold the column to a syndicate which in turn sold the column to newspapers around the country (including the defunct *Chicago Daily News*). Dr. Robert S. Mendelsohn, media star, was launched.

Ironically, he became so popular with readers that the papers dropped him one by one. The local medical establishments in cities across the country put so much pressure on the papers that carried his unorthodox medical views that many stopped printing them. Only papers in New Orleans; Xenia, Ohio; and Tuscon, Arizona withstood the pressure all through the years.

Three times a week Mendelsohn railed against most things medical — from cancer treatment to ultrasound, from medication to intervention. He didn't advise people against seeking treatment, but he did advise them to ask a lot of questions — and get a lot of answers before succumbing to doctors, hospitals, drugs or surgery. When the *Daily News* folded in 1978, Chatz tried to figure out a way for Chicagoans to continue reading the heretical ideas of Bob Mendelsohn.

Together, they began publishing a newsletter, *The People's Doctor*, which organized and augmented column material for die-hard

Mendelsohn fans.

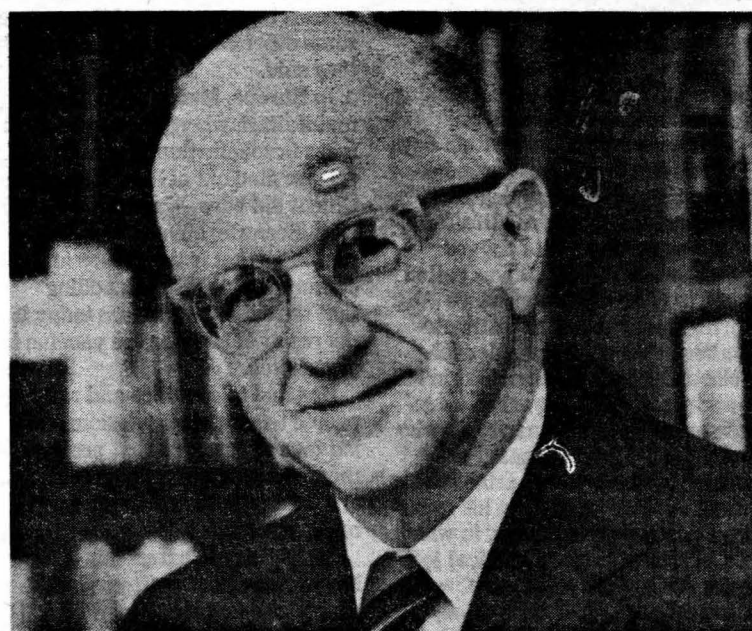
Along with the column and newsletter, Mendelsohn also published four best-selling books over the years — edited by writers other than Chatz — which put him on a sort of year-round publicity tour — from Phil Donahue to Joan Rivers, from the *Southtown Economist* to *The New York Times*. As a result, the newsletter got more and more popular.

Chatz says at first she and Mendelsohn thought their fame and fortune lay in column syndication — but learned very shortly their future was with the newsletter. Soon, the column only served to provide a continuous flow of information to be incorporated into the newsletter, and most of their correspondents were newsletter subscribers rather than column aficionados. "The tail began wagging the dog," says Chatz.

Finally, Chatz enclosed the sleeping porch off her second floor bedroom to use as an office — and piles and piles of medical clippings, letters, rough draft columns, newsletters, etc. began to grow. Today, the piles are higher than ever.

Mendelsohn and me

During her years with Mendelsohn, Chatz never neglected her freelancing career, her way of making a name for herself. After the decline of the *Daily News*, she became a good friend of then-*Sun-Times* Features Editor Carroll Stoner, who used Chatz' work regularly. In 1984, Stoner asked Chatz to co-write a new, glitzy, well-publicized (but, alas, short-



Contemporary Books, Inc.

Dr. Robert S. Mendelsohn

lived) society column called *Click*. Chatz realized this would entail a big time commitment and that she would need help editing the Mendelsohn material.

She chose me to help.

I met Dr. Mendelsohn as a little girl in the 1950s. The only men I loved more were my father and grandfather. He had joined the pediatric practice of Dr. Ralph Kunstadter, a legendary personality in his own right, and became a close friend and protege.

Dr. Mendelsohn was so nice, so cheerful. It didn't matter that he poked me with needles, had me urinate in a goofy container, photographed my naked chest behind a big square shield, and dispensed antibiotics like candy. Once he even talked about administering a kind of growth hormone.

Reminded of these practices after he became a medical heretic, he just shook his head, and with a faint, ironic smile, admitted that early in his career he was one of

the "highest priests of the religion of modern medicine."

At the slightest trace of congestion or fever, Dr. Mendelsohn was at our house, reassuring my mother and father. When my brother was born in 1960 with hyaline membrane disease (which killed President Kennedy's baby), Dr. Mendelsohn spent the night with him at the hospital — carefully regulating his oxygen — thereby assuring a cure without the complications of an oxygen overdose.

People all over the Chicago area had stories like this — of his saving children's lives and saving parents' sanity. Later, as a GP, he continued to be a patient advocate by storming hospitals, lending a sympathetic ear, as well as support to those hoping to have home births and success at breastfeeding their children. He spent time writing letters, being a friend or going to court for anyone — from Jehovah's Witnesses to the victims of malpractice. Swarms of people visited his home just to talk about the state of things. They called from all over for advice.

When I was pregnant with my daughter in 1982, his heresy was well-established and I followed his career through the papers and on radio and TV. I asked him to be my baby's pediatrician, and he convinced me to forego my traditional obstetrician in favor of a heretical home birth protege of his (who also had delivered Dr. Mendelsohn's own grandchildren — as good a recommendation as anyone should need.)

He convinced me to breastfeed — fanatically; to forego day care and babysitters; and to forget any and all immunizations for my daughter, of which he described the dangers in minute detail. He convinced me to abandon the religion of modern medicine, while instilling in me (and all his patients/friends) a profound respect for family life and its power to nurture and heal.

When I resumed my freelance writing in 1984, I called him one day while working on a story about what to look for in a good

(Continued on page 8)



Paul McGrath

Carrying on the flame: Vera Chatz in her office.

THE DOCTOR

(Continued from page 7)

answering service.

"So, you're freelancing again," he said. "You know, Vera's looking for someone to work with us."

I met with Vera, and within days I began one of the most broadening, satisfying and moving part-time assignments of my life.

Whenever Vera was bogged down or vacationing, I was called upon to edit Dr. Mendelsohn's thrice weekly column. Sitting together in Vera's office, Mendelsohn and I pounded them out in his punchy style. We answered a succession of letters from people who were generally mistreated or misled by the medical establishment. And we worked on his favorite *Dear Reader* columns, in which Dr. Mendelsohn used medical journals, AMA press releases, pharmaceutical package inserts or any current medical issue to present a well-reasoned and thought out "other side of the story."

Mendelsohn would rail against a drug or treatment, and within months or years, the medical establishment would catch up and prove him right. For he warned against the anti-nausea drug administered to pregnant women, Bendectin, as well as the anti-acne drug, Accutane, both later proven to cause birth defects.

Chatz says that any early skepticism she may have had about his skepticism was swept away with time. She says she, too, never found him to be wrong about anything.

In spite of his belittling the AMA on a continuous basis, he never dropped out; and they never cancelled their newsletter subscription.

Being a heretic

His stand against routine childhood immunizations, of course, drew the most wrath. One day we pored over public health documents from the late 1950s or early 1960s — a series of straight transcriptions of comments made by the perpetrators of the polio vaccination program at a meeting to evaluate the effects of the mass immunization.

The epidemic was getting worse, they agreed. Massive immunization seemed to be spreading the

disease even more. And there were some other dangers to be explored, they said.

In Europe, Mendelsohn always maintained, where there was not a mass immunization program, the disease died out at about the same time it did here — and in the same way. Because, Mendelsohn always reasoned, that is the nature of communicable disease, adding that the only polio we see today is the result of keeping the vaccine in circulation.

He tried to convince and rally people to refuse inoculations, citing tons of research that proved them unnecessary, dangerous, and a definite threat to the immune system.

"Now," says Chatz, "this is no longer a medical matter. When people call and write to me, I tell them it is a political issue. It's the laws of the states that have to change, not the doctors."

In March of 1988, Dr. Mendelsohn and I had several dates set up to work. I had several tidbits for him — gossip I knew he'd enjoy, some clippings I'd been saving for him.

He'd had a sore leg for some time, the result of a fall he'd taken, a sprain he said he suffered while carrying luggage at a hotel on a speaking tour.

I had to cancel one appointment. Then he called and cancelled another — travel plans, he said. A few days later, Vera called and tersely told me Dr. Mendelsohn was sick and that she didn't know when we could make another appointment.

At 7 a.m., on April 6, my father called to tell me Dr. Mendelsohn had died the day before. The paper said it was a heart attack.

The funeral was later that day — a packed event at a North Side funeral home. There were so many people who loved him, who felt close to him, young and old, rich and poor, simple and sophisticated. His son-in-law captured him perfectly when he said, "Dad was the most original and creative thinker . . ." At the gravesite, Vera Chatz looked terrible. Her face was drawn and pale, a black

scarf covered her unkempt hair and protected her from a light drizzle. Black shadows circled her eyes.

Chatz says that Dr. Mendelsohn had a mission. The way I see it, his mission was accomplished.

There are no miracles, he taught people. There is a price to pay for everything. Treatments have side effects. Drugs do damage. And some prevention is not always worth a pound of cure.

When complications from his diabetes got the better of his body, he decided to forego treatment for a severely infected leg (hence the "sprained ankle") and blood poisoning.

For days, family and friends hovered around. Some agreed to support him. Others tried to change his mind. Simply put, he made his decision. In his 60s, and a diabetic, things could only get more medically complicated for him in the future. He refused the benediction of the religion of modern medicine. And he died willingly. He put his money where his mouth had been all those years. He died at home near those who cared for him most of all.

"It was like every library in the world burned down," says Vera Chatz of the death of the mind of her famous collaborator.

A part of me died with him that April. But for Vera Chatz, 53 years old and a grandmother, a part of her was born. Within days of the funeral, Vera Chatz was faced with a big decision. Stopping her "Mendelsohn work" had never crossed her mind before.

Naturally, the column ceased immediately. But what about the newsletter? Could she go it alone? Did she dare continue this part of her career? And, if so, in what form?

The idea came to her quickly, and she went with it. It's been evolving ever since.

First, she bought out Rita Mendelsohn. Then she restructured. Vera knew and corresponded with prestigious "followers" of Mendelsohn from all over the country and the world, as well as those in her own backyard. (Literally. Protégés Dr. Fred Ettner and Randi Ettner, Ph.D. had moved next door to Dr. Mendel-

sohn.) None could handle the newsletter alone. But why not ask them to answer particular subscriber questions, and to create occasional "columns" of their own in the newsletter? With the Mendelsohn perspective. In the Mendelsohn vein.

She named it, "The Doctor's People" and began by dredging up old Mendelsohn material in a "best of" idea, played up La Leche League founder Marian Thompson's contributions (she had always written regular pieces while Mendelsohn was alive, as well), and called on her "Advisory Board" for sporadic voices on various topics. None of the disciples turned her down.

Then, she put all of Mendelsohn's anti-immunization newsletters (always heavily requested as back issues) together in a book titled, "But Doctor, About that shot . . ."

Subscriptions fell from 6,500 to 4,500. One man wrote to say he was cancelling because the newsletter had no consistent voice.

Chatz wrote back and reminded the man that the consistent voice was dead. He would have to settle for topical clones.

The man wrote again, suggesting that Vera herself should be that consistent voice. MD-less Vera Chatz liked the idea; the man renewed his subscription. So Vera Chatz has found her niche. Her Mendelsohn years and her Mendelsohn files fortify her. The media calls her. She carries on.

"I can explore subjects that I'm interested in," she says. "Subjects that Bob used to touch on only peripherally. And I can keep alive the way he looked at medicine . . ." And she can do it as a journalist.

For example, there was her

much-copied report on the role psychotropic medications played in Laurie Dann's murderous rampage in north suburban Winnetka. Another was a first-hand report on the ills rampant in the day care industry. Another issue of the reborn newsletter covered the story of a West Coast midwife jailed for "murdering" a fetus.

Everyone still sends notes and clippings for the newsletter, says Chatz, including Mendelsohn's widow — Vera's close friend. It was Rita Mendelsohn who actually began corresponding with the convicted midwife.

Five thousand people regularly receive the \$24 dollar per year monthly newsletter, including many people from all facets of the health professions. They all read the opinions of Vera Chatz, Dr. Mendelsohn's main disciple.

However, in place of the popular doctor's media tours provided by his book publisher (which they used to rely on for new subscribers), Chatz has taken to attending health fairs, and doing advertising, marketing and public relations herself.

"It's like any small business," says Chatz.

Is Chatz Dr. Robert S. Mendelsohn's "Colonel Parker?" Or a gifted journalist picking up where a gifted doctor left off?

"Bob had a mission," says Chatz. "He knew he would live a certain amount of years. He drove himself to get the word out and I was instrumental in helping him."

"I don't have that mission. If the newsletter stays alive, I'll stay with it. If I have something to say, I have a forum."

— Bonnie McGrath

Bonnie McGrath is the media critic for the Naperville City Star.



Open your eyes and see just how many subjects are covered in the new edition of the Consumer Information Catalog. It's free just for the asking and so are nearly half of the 200 federal publications described inside. Booklets on subjects like financial and career planning; eating right, exercising, and staying healthy; housing and child care; federal benefit programs. Just about everything you would need to know. Write today. We'll send you the latest edition of the Consumer Information Catalog, which is updated and published quarterly. It'll be a great help, you'll see. Just write:

Consumer Information Center
Department TD
Pueblo, Colorado 81009

A public service of this publication
and the Consumer Information Center of the
U. S. General Services Administration.

Is Your Child Caught In A Failure Chain?

Your son or daughter may need help because of weak study skills or poor reading or math skills. Some daydream or talk too much in class, and some are even unmotivated or lack confidence, despite good IQs.

Let's improve school skills while there's still time. Our certified teachers help students of all ages overcome frustration and failure. A few hours a week can help your child gain the Educational Edge® and see how much fun learning really is. Don't wait any longer . . . call us today to get your child back on track in school.

Individual testing and tutoring in Reading, Study Skills, Writing, Phonics, Spelling, Math, and SAT/ACT prep.



THE HUNTINGTON Learning Center Westmont • 963-3336
Naperville • 369-6966

© 1987 Huntington Learning Centers, Inc.

PRE-SEASON CHECK!

Help avoid cold weather repairs...
Call Sears today
for furnace maintenance.



GAS FURNACE CHECK ONLY \$35⁹⁵
Expires 10/30/89

OIL FURNACE CHECK ONLY \$49⁹⁵
Expires 10/30/89

SEARS Service Center

453 S. Schmale Rd.
Carol Stream

Ph. 690-8100
For Parts: 690-7900

OPEN: Mon.-Fri. 7:30 a.m.-7 p.m.
Sat. 7:30 a.m.-5 p.m. Closed Sunday