

OPINION AND COMMENTARY

Memories of a medical heretic

What piece of medical technology, if used, would easily save 100,000 lives and billions of dollars every year that are now being destroyed and wasted by unnecessary, dangerous and unscientific doctoring?

The answer is not the heart-lung machine, the CAT scanner, or some new and exotic piece of medical technology.

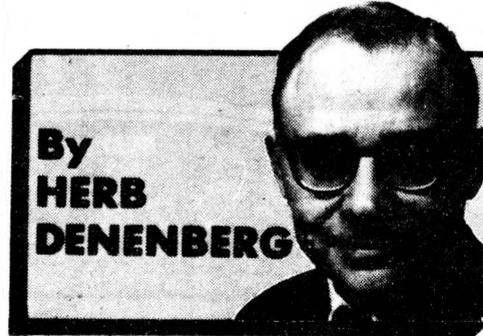
The answer is a whistle, to be used by a few knowledgeable, gutsy doctors willing to blow it on unnecessary surgery, over-prescribing, unproven treatments and all the other standard abuses of modern medicine.

This all sounds like a simple order, but whistle-blowing doctors are among the rarest and most valuable people on earth.

Over the years, starting with my days as Pennsylvania insurance commissioner in the early 1970s, when I was crusading against unnecessary surgery, I found almost every doctor could tell you unnecessary surgery is widespread. They would quickly admit it and document it off the record.

But few would go on the record and go public. They would not only refuse to name names, but would even refuse to publicly acknowledge the problem. That's the reason unnecessary surgery and the other abuses of modern medicine have never been controlled.

Doctors, of course, have reason to maintain the code of silence. Those who criticize or question modern medicine are subjected to pressure and ostracism, may be denied referrals from other doctors, are



By
**HERB
DENENBERG**

often denied promotion in hospitals and medical schools, may even have their license to practice challenged and may be hounded out of medicine altogether.

That's why I felt a devastating loss when I learned of the recent death of Dr. Robert Mendelsohn, a distinguished pediatrician from the University of Illinois Medical School, and one of the few courageous doctors in the country who was willing to tell the truth about medical malpractice and medical errors.

I frequently quoted him in my columns and often relied on his expertise. He was the author of the best-selling book, "How to Raise a Healthy Child in Spite of Your Pediatrician." In that book, Mendelsohn concluded: "The best way to raise a healthy child is to keep him away from doctors, except for emergency care in the case of an accident or an obviously serious illness."

Some may find that kind of conclusion outlandish. But when you read his books, listen to his arguments and check them

out, you find he was certainly worth listening to.

Mendelsohn would not only speak out against the well-known abuses of medicine, but could also see all the kinds of errors and miscalculations built right into modern medicine and accepted as gospel by most doctors. In his book, "Confessions of a Medical Heretic," he wrote that 50 to 90 percent of what is being taught in medical school is either wrong, outdated or irrelevant. By the time you finish reading one of his books, you're convinced that estimate may be conservative.

But even if you think his estimates of medical mistakes are high, you have to agree with one of his favorite proposals: to set up a Department of Iatrogenic Disease in every medical school in the country. Iatrogenic ailments are ones caused by doctors, such as adverse reactions to drugs, cancer caused by X-rays and unnecessary surgery.

This new Department of Iatrogenic Medicine would study all the ways doctors cause disease and disability, how medical care often causes more harm than good, and how proposed new treatments might prove harmful.

In fact, a few weeks before his death, Mendelsohn asked me to help him establish an Academy of Iatrogenic Disease, to bring together doctors and other experts who would study and warn the public about doctor-caused disease.

If that Academy of Iatrogenic Disease is ever established, it should create a Hall of

Fame to honor distinguished critics of medicine, with Dr. Robert Mendelsohn as one of the first inductees.

You should read some of Dr. Mendelsohn's books, but here are a few quotations to give you the flavor of the man and his work:

"I have long since concluded that locating the tonsils within easy reach of the surgeon's knife may have been God's only mistake."

"When it comes to caring for children, one grandmother is worth two pediatricians."

"Most doctors are unable to recognize wellness, simply because they're not trained in wellness but in disease."

"Whatever your doctor says or recommends, you have to first consider how it will benefit him."

"No matter who your doctor is and what hospital he or she has put you in, you're always in mortal danger, so you always should be on your guard."

"There's always going to be something wrong with you, because the doctor doesn't get anything out of the situation if you're normal or healthy."

"You should fear a doctor with an X-ray machine as you would a six-year-old waving a loaded gun."

"Most surgeons, constitutionally flat-chested, can't comprehend the trauma they cause when they chop off a woman's breast."

Consumer advocate Herb Denenberg's column appears on Friday and Sunday.