

quackery. Rose pulls the "radioactive pad," actually a bag filled

effects can be dangerous." Rose says that very few of the

diagnosed falsely and should stop taking her insulin immediately. The woman

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When a child is sick, should we rush the little darling to the doctor?

Many of us were born and reared without benefit of trained medical intervention. There was some luck involved, of course, but as we recall our physician-free childhood and youth, we sometimes wonder if some of today's parents aren't inclined to "overdoctorize" their little darlings.

There is no neat answer to the question of when a child should be seen by a physician. There are some general guidelines, but in the final analysis it is a judgment call.

Now, either to help or to hinder that call, depending on your point of view, we have Dr. Robert S. Mendelsohn, an Evanston pediatrician with a longstanding reputation for speaking out in a manner that frequently has colleagues gnashing their teeth. According to Mendelsohn, 95 percent of all pediatric office visits are unnecessary and potentially harmful.

"Avoid your doctor whenever you can," Mendelsohn writes in a recently published paperback version of an earlier book, "How To Raise a Healthy Child in Spite of Your Doctor" (Ballantine, \$3.95).

Here's how he backs up his advice: Too often, the risk of careless or needless medical intervention is greater than the dangers of the illness itself.

Pediatricians spend most of their time treating parental distress. The child rarely



Health matters

By Bill Stokes

needs treatment but gets it anyway and is subjected to the consequences, and it is the parent who gets the relief.

Mother nature, mothers, grandmothers, even fathers and grandfathers are the best doctors around because they do not share the typical doctor's compulsion to interfere with the body's efforts and ability to heal itself.

At least 90 percent of drugs prescribed by pediatricians are unnecessary and a costly risk to the child who takes them.

At least 90 percent of children's surgery is unnecessary, needlessly exposing the patient to the risks of death from surgery itself, from anesthesia or from infections contracted in the hospital.

Most pediatricians know very little about nutrition and drugs; so their patients suffer because of the pediatrician's ignorance of the impact of diet on health and of the hazards and side effects of drugs.

Mendelsohn uses much of his book to

elaborate; he also expounds on his contentions that the current policy of immunization is dangerous, that home birth is safer than hospital birth, that PKU tests are unnecessary, that fever as high as 103 does not require a doctor's attention unless there are other symptoms and that there is no need to seek treatment for a child's earache unless it persists longer than 48 hours.

It is easy to understand why many of Mendelsohn's colleagues are not pleased with him. And before you consider his opinions in formulating your attitudes, consider an opposing view.

Speaking for the American Academy of Pediatrics is Dr. Robert A. Mendelson, a Portland, Ore., pediatrician who is on the academy's committee on communications.

"The best thing you could do with Mendelsohn's book is ignore it," Mendelson said. "It contributes nothing to the body of scientific knowledge, and while it claims to be a guide for parents, it gives them bad information."

Mendelson said that because of the similarity in names, he often was confused with author Mendelsohn, which was not something he enjoyed.

"Most of what Mendelsohn writes is his opinion and not based on any research or facts," Mendelson said. "While it may be true that 95 percent of childhood illnesses

would not be fatal, much can be done to guard against side effects and prevent suffering.

"As for needless intervention," Mendelson said, "I don't know of any pediatrician who does that. Certainly part of dealing with young patients is to reassure parents, but that does not mean treating a child who does not need it. A pediatrician tries to use a risk-benefit approach and works with parents in trying to do what is best for the child."

"In regard to Mendelsohn's claim that 90 percent of drugs and 90 percent of surgery is unnecessary, that is simply his opinion. There are no studies or any solid evidence to back up such a claim."

Mendelson also said that the charge that pediatricians do not know about nutrition and drugs is "simply not true."

But what Mendelson and the American Academy of Pediatricians find most unsettling about Mendelsohn's book is his condemnation of mass immunization. The academy issued a statement at the time the hard-cover version of the book was published in which it disclaimed any connection with Mendelsohn's stand.

"Mendelsohn focuses on a few isolated incidents to condemn a system that has done a tremendous amount of good," Mendelson said. "It is dangerous to tell parents not to have children immunized."

Mendelsohn writes that pediatricians discourage breast feeding, but Mendelson says that also is not true.

"Most pediatricians encourage it because they know it is best for the baby," Mendelson said.

Rather than stay away from the pediatrician, as Mendelsohn suggests, Mendelson said that parents who are undecided about whether their child needs professional help should pick up the telephone and call their doctor.

"Most of us are too busy to encourage unnecessary office visits," Mendelson said. "And by talking to a parent over the telephone, between us we can usually make a sensible decision as to whether or not a child needs professional attention."

There was no telephone handy the night my wife and I drove 50 miles from a remote campground to a hospital with a child who we were sure was having an appendicitis attack.

If we had been camping with Mendelsohn, we probably would not have made the drive. If Mendelson had been around, we probably would have.

But it was a judgment call, and we would do the same thing again, even though the problem was nothing more serious than stomach gas.

Now, what was I saying about "overdoctorization?"

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