

Radical Physician Challenges Medical Establishment

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Dr. Robert Mendelsohn has struck again.

—Memorandum issued by the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists

By ALLAN PARACHINI,
Times Staff Writer

Advice from professed medical heretic Dr. Robert S. Mendelsohn:

—You should not have your children immunized because shots that have been required by law and given for generations either are dangerous or don't do any good.

—Polio vaccine wasn't responsible for the virtual disappearance of the disease; it went away by itself.

—Expectant mothers should avoid periodic examinations and other aspects of what is generally called "well baby care."

—Ultrasound scanning may cause leukemia.

These philosophical utterances—all of which fly in the face of what is held sacred by mainstream doctors—do *not* come from the mouth of some wild-eyed radical quack facing 37 counts of practicing medicine without a license.



LARRY DAVIS / Los Angeles Times

Radical Dr. Robert Mendelsohn says "medicine is moving in my direction."

Quite to the contrary. At one time or another, they have been expressed calmly by Mendelsohn, a nattily dressed Evanston,

Ill., pediatrician who, based strictly on appearance, could have been the mild-mannered doctor after whom television's Marcus Welby was modeled.

This radical is 58, with silver-colored short hair. He has a resume brimming with credentials that are, by any conventional standard, impeccable. He looks like anybody's grandfather, with good reason; he is a grandfather three times. "They have not been vaccinated against *anything*," he quickly says of his grandchildren.

Yet these publicly expressed opinions and widely published writings have cast Mendelsohn in the improbable role of perhaps the leading antagonist of the American medical establishment. At times, the reaction to Mendelsohn verges on the apoplectic.

"Discussing Mendelsohn is a no-win proposition," said a spokesperson for the American Medical Assn. "We don't even want to get tangled up with him in print."

A Buffalo doctor complained to the National News Council earlier this year about a

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patient of his who, he said, threatened to stop taking high blood pressure pills after reading a Mendelsohn column and subsequently died of a stroke.

The council recommended that newspapers publish disclaimers urging readers not to substitute the advice in medical columns for treatment by their own doctors. The Buffalo Evening News, which had published the column in question, dropped Mendelsohn in the ensuing controversy.

When Mendelsohn agreed to appear on a Los Angeles radio talk show—where he was to debate the personal pediatrician to the announcer's family—the Los Angeles County Medical Assn. suggested that The Times cover the alleged showdown. The approach, said the local association, had been suggested by its parent group, the AMA.

Mendelsohn has written two books that have attacked virtually everything for which American medicine stands, and have dismissed as worthless—or life-threatening—virtually everything in the conventional physician's armamentarium. A third book is being written. It will, Mendelsohn promises, be equally iconoclastic.

In "Confessions of a Medical Heretic" in 1979, Mendelsohn compared modern medicine to a failed religion and called its practitioners frauds more interested in acting like priests than scientists. "It takes a priest to fight a priest," he says of his own background.

In "Malepractice," published in 1981, Mendelsohn condemned medicine as an inherently sexist institution and, in an aside, concluded in a reference to Robert Young, the actor who portrayed television's Welby, that "medical schools do a better job of training doctors to be actors than they do teaching them to keep you well."

Diverse Forums

Mendelsohn has a syndicated column that, weekly in 20 newspapers, propounds his unorthodox medical philosophy. He stays busy with a small private practice and with appearances on television and radio talk shows and in forums as diverse as televised born-again Christian religious services and conventions of a group that espouses faith in questionable medical approaches ranging from Laetrile to pyramid power.

Some of his other conclusions are these:

—You should avoid at all costs giving birth in a hospital and you should not patronize a conventionally trained obstetrician or pediatrician. Ideally, your baby should be delivered by a midwife, preferably one who will agree in advance to lie under oath and say she administered certain drugs required by law for newborns when, in fact, she did not.

—Annual physical examinations and Pap tests are worthless and possibly life-threatening. Ninety percent of coronary bypass surgery is "at best of little value and at worst quite harmful."

—American doctors conjured up the disease hypertension—high blood pressure—so they could sell pills to treat it.

Yet Mendelsohn is the same man who graduated from the prestigious Pritzker School of Medicine at the University of Chicago in 1951 and went on to hold a variety of faculty positions at the University of Illinois' Abraham Lincoln School of Medicine. He was named to top administrative posts, including director of ambulatory pediatric services, at Michael Reese Medical Center—one of Chicago's most prominent hospitals. He was ousted from the Michael Reese job after his column and books started to appear and staff doctors brought pressure on the hospital administration.

He has held specialty board certification in pediatrics since 1957. He served as national medical director for Project Head Start. He was a consultant to the Illinois Department of Mental Health. In the mid- and late 1970s, he served for three years on—and was elected chairman of—the state board that set licensing standards for doctors and held hearings in cases where wrongdoing was alleged.

A master of oral argument, Mendelsohn once rhetorically eviscerated a prominent Chicago surgeon who appeared before the Illinois Medical Examining Committee to urge that only surgeons be permitted by law to perform acupuncture. Under stealthy cross-examination by Mendelsohn, the surgeon was forced to concede

his own hospital had gaping inconsistencies in the way it awarded surgical privileges to staff physicians. A moribund liberal acupuncture rule was adopted by a wide margin with chiropractors permitted to participate.

In those days, Mendelsohn was widely viewed as a vocal medical nonconformist, yet he was still perceived as within—though at the extreme edges of—conventional medicine. But as the 1970s drew to a close, say both Mendelsohn and people who have known him well for many years, his radicalism turned to a variety of extremism. And that has estranged him philosophically even from some fellow radical doctors who were once among his staunchest supporters.

For Dr. Quentin Young, who supervised medical care for demonstrators at the violent 1968 Democratic National Convention protests and was once investigated by the House Un-American Activities Committee for alleged Communist sympathies, Mendelsohn is an old friend who has simply gone too far. Young, who has been called "a political radical but a therapeutic conservative," said the last straw was Mendelsohn's position against all childhood immunizations.

'Ludicrous and Dangerous Extreme'

"I'm an old friend, but I just think he (Mendelsohn) is all wet in carrying the serious concerns of over-medicalization and doctor-domination to the ludicrous and dangerous extreme of concluding that any and all vaccinations are dangerous.

"I don't think the evidence supports it and it creates a mood of distrust and adversary feelings that serves people poorly."

Mendelsohn has felt compelled to take positions ever more unconventional and increasingly hostile to the medical Establishment of which he was once a part. As that has happened, even some of the medical experts Mendelsohn cites for support have begun to say he has misstated or misinterpreted their work.

In a recent column and in an interview with The Times, for instance, Mendelsohn contended that his anti-vaccination stance was justified in part by research of Dr. Larry Baraff, an expert in pediatrics, infectious disease and emergency medicine at UCLA.

A study published just last January by Baraff, said Mendelsohn, concluded that in Los Angeles County, 53 of 145 deaths due to Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) occurred suspiciously within a few days of immunization with a triple-duty vaccine that inoculates against whooping cough, tetanus and diphtheria. The Baraff study, said Mendelsohn, showed a relationship between immunization and SIDS, one of the most common killers of babies.

But Baraff said his research established nothing of the sort and that, in fact, a later study by other researchers found the possible statistical connection between SIDS and vaccinations simply did not exist. It turned out, said Baraff, to be a mathematical quirk.

"All normal and healthy kids should be immunized," said Baraff. "If I had children, I would immunize them."

Yet Mendelsohn, a devout Jew who greets even the most withering criticism with a cheerful manner, remains curiously unfazed by all the controversy that surrounds him. He is, he says, totally convinced that he is right.

"My issue is with the honesty of doctors," he said. "In the case of immunizations, for instance, if physicians would give parents both sides of the story, I would have no objection.

"In immunization, there are two minority positions. I'm in the minority that opposes them. Another minority is enthusiastic about them. The great body of doctors, 90%, just do what they're told and never question it."

Mendelsohn contends that, in a broad sense, many of his radical positions of years gone by have been gradually embraced by the medical mainstream. He has pilloried annual physical examinations, annual Pap tests, many routine X-rays and a wide variety of drugs. Gradually, one organized medical group or another has, in a broad sense, agreed. Annual physical exams are now in comparative disrepute, along with annual Pap smears for some women.

Routine X-rays of the chest, for instance, have been called into significant question. And several of the drugs against which Mendelsohn has campaigned most stren-

uously have been pulled from the market. His most recent vindication, he says, was in the case of Bendectin, the morning sickness drug taken off the market last year after dozens of suits were filed by parents who claim their babies were deformed as a result of side effects.

"I'm ending up in the mainstream of medicine because medicine is moving in my direction," Mendelsohn said.

Mendelsohn said he became radicalized sometime between 1975, when he started writing his newspaper column, and 1979, when his first book appeared. The column began to question—gently, then, compared to its tone today—some of medicine's sacred cows.

"Originally, I tried in the column to talk about the good *and* bad of medicine," he said. "It became harder and harder. I found out I could criticize *everything*."

Medicine Now Less Scientific

"So now, I just take everything in medicine and subject it to scientific scrutiny. As medicine has moved along, it has gotten less scientific. I think that started to happen in the middle 1960s, with the explosion of medical technology.

"Doctors gave up doing controlled studies (research where a new treatment is examined by giving it to some patients and withholding it from others to compare results). That had never happened before."

The problem, he contends, is that medical schools start would-be doctors out with the wrong role models, since most professors are researchers and are not primarily concerned with patient care. "The researchers are dishonest," Mendelsohn contended. "They have to get grants and they lie to get them."

It is attitudes like that that have turned relations between Mendelsohn and many of his colleagues frosty. Even the American Academy of Pediatrics, of which he has been a member for 30 years, questions his motives and his science.

"We regret that he (Mendelsohn) causes this consternation in the public mind," said Dr. M. Harry Jennison, executive director of the 24,000-member academy based in Evanston, Ill. "It's a free country and if Bob Mendelsohn wants to make money doing that, he can. There was a time when Dr. Mendelsohn appeared to be a fairly committed, progressive thinker. At some point, it would seem he caught onto the notion that selling books and making media appearances is a more exciting way to live."

In two areas—immunization and ultrasound examination of pregnant women—Jennison said the academy takes most significant issue with Mendelsohn. "His statements about immunization are grossly incorrect," Jennison said. "The general statement he makes about how going to a pediatrician consigns you to a fate of doom is irresponsible. He is doing a disservice to families and children and he does it in the name of promotion.

Similar sentiments are held by the Washington-based American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists, with 23,000 members. The college's executive director, Dr. Warren H. Pearse, said Mendelsohn first caught his attention with one of his first campaigns—urging mothers not to have babies in hospitals and to give birth at home, instead, in almost all cases.

"I wrote to Dr. Mendelsohn and asked him for the data on which that statement was made," Pearse said in a telephone interview, "and I didn't hear from him."

But if long-time friends, like Chicago's Dr. Quentin Young, have started to dismiss Mendelsohn just as professional societies have, still others remain convinced that he speaks the truth and should be perceived as a lone sentinel, sounding a vital alarm.

"It's my personal experience that there's very little of what Bob has said that is regarded as extreme which has not, as time passed, become the norm," said John McKnight, director of the urban affairs and policy research program at Northwestern University and a

nationally known critic of the health care system.

"I have no evidence, over the long run, that he's ever been wrong. The fact that they (organized medical groups and other doctors) hit him so hard suggests to me that he probably is going at one of their hallowed totems.

"And the more hallowed the totem, the less science there is likely to be around it."