

Letter from . . . Chicago

Beyond the etheric

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When George Bernard Shaw warned his readers to treat the private doctor exactly as they would treat a private executioner or fortune teller, he stayed within an honourable tradition of doctor-baiting that extends from Aristophanes, through Molière, right down to modern times. During the first half of the twentieth century, however, the American medical profession enjoyed a unique golden age of high prestige and freedom from criticism.¹ Though at times perceived as uncaring or insensitive to social needs, the doctors remained secure on their pedestal until the late 1950s, and began to slip only when the socialised medicine debate, combined with internal self-criticism, undermined the public's confidence in the profession. Yet even during the golden era there were occasional articles about downright incompetent doctors, as shown by a 1931 article entitled "Unfit doctors must go."¹

I mention this because in May the *Chicago Tribune* published a series of five articles charging that the Illinois Department of Registration and Education fails to protect the public adequately against doctors who are incompetent, impaired, unethical, or downright criminal. The department, located in the State's capital at Springfield, is the agency in charge of licensing, regulating, and disciplining half-a-million people in 29 professions, including doctors, nurses, social workers, and veterinarians, and also beauticians, barbers, real estate agents, tree experts, court reporters, and embalmers. It sets standards for each profession, investigates complaints, and enforces disciplinary action in conjunction with boards or committees composed of the members of the appropriate professions. With a budget of \$8m a year it employs 263 people, many of whom are bogged down in the paperwork required to renew the licences of these professionals. For the States' almost 30 000 doctors, osteopaths, and chiropractors, it has a budget of \$720 000 and 11 investigators to look into complaints—and, according to the articles, the job is not well done.

Needless to say, such a series of articles would not be popular if it did not include some juicy cases. There is the doctor who always prescribed high doses of steroids and tetracycline but failed to maintain written records because he kept the histories of his 10 000 patients in his head. There is the young woman permanently left paraplegic after a plastic surgery operation to refashion her nose. A man complaining of dizziness died on the operating table with air in the cerebral vessels, but no tumour was ever discovered. One patient became unable ever to stand again on her feet as a result of an operation on a bunion. Some doctors repeatedly abused their patients and shouted at them, others requested and obtained sexual favours, and a few were regularly prescribing narcotics or were prosecuted for drunken driving or drug abuse. One anaesthetist sniffed gas in the operating room to the extent that he would become totally incoherent and unable

to inflate or deflate the chest. Several obstetricians botched up abortions or carried out unnecessary hysterectomies, and one ripped off a baby's nose during a delivery where forceps application was not indicated in the first place. Some surgeons have been sued for malpractice for up to 15 times and others have been expelled from the medical staffs of several hospitals but somehow have managed to continue to practise. One doctor, committed to a mental institution in another State, moved to Illinois and re-entered practice. Patients have had their bladder infections treated with electrical vibrators or have had intra-uterine devices inserted while they were pregnant. Some doctors merely cheated Medicare and Medicaid.

Most of these doctors continue to practise, and very few have ever had their licences revoked. The *Tribune* also charges that the department tends to export its problems by giving incompetent doctors a clean bill of health when they move to practise in other States and, conversely, that it registers doctors debarred from practising elsewhere. It also points out that other States have pursued their bad doctors much more aggressively, and that in California there were 10 times as many disciplinary actions during 1981. Suggested remedies include automatic investigation of doctors expelled from hospitals' medical staffs or repeatedly found guilty of malpractice. In response to these articles the Illinois State Medical Society publicly reaffirmed its policy of assisting the State in disciplining unethical and incompetent doctors, and the State government has set up a sub-committee to improve the department's procedures and correct what it sees as a "clear danger to the public."

Shady practices

The police, meanwhile, have arrested for the third time a self-appointed Filipino witch-doctor who until recently carried out a large practice in one of Chicago's neighbourhoods. This man, previously prosecuted for performing illegal abortions, was also charged for practising without a licence when sacrificing a white dove to purify a woman and cure her painful shoulder. He also told the woman that her shoulder was hurting because her husband was seeing another woman who had put an evil spell on her, and asked her to return the following week with some hot water and a coconut, which he would grind up and rub into her forehead. Police described his office as tiny and musty, filled with all kinds of vials of coloured fluid, with a dog and a cat running freely through the room, and a big black snake being kept in an aquarium.

Another form of quackery, that of electricity, goes back to Elisha Perkins, the father of American quackery, who in the 1790s developed a "tractor" to cure various ailments by delivering electric shocks. Since then various charlatans have treated patients with similar electrical devices, many of which are now collected in a National Museum of Medical Quackery in St Louis, most of these items having been confiscated at various times by the Food and Drug Administration. Proposed for relieving muscle spasms, improving the shape of the body,

developing the bust, promoting loss of weight, or removing wrinkles, they have also been advertised for curing cancer, lowering high blood pressure, or "to remove cobwebs from the brain and rejuvenate the personality." Electricity is popular because patients can feel it when it is being used, and it is of interest that in recent years the application of a current has been proposed as a legitimate method for promoting the healing of ununited fractures, breaking up kidney stones, helping the deaf with cochlear implants or bionic ears, possibly destroying bacteria, and even straightening teeth, but so far only in cats.

Then we read about a professor of biology at one of Chicago's reputable universities, who also operated a highly suspect cancer clinic in a small town in Southern Illinois. According to a pattern now well established, this man treated his credulous victims with enzymes, Laetrile, eucalyptus inhalations, coffee enemas, colonic irrigations, fasting, "reflexology," and megadoses of vitamins. A further report of shady practices comes from Atlanta, where several patients with rheumatoid arthritis became ill after being treated with Chinese herbal medicines containing lead, cadmium, phenylbutazone, and chlorthalidopoxide. Then there is also a new method of communicating with the dead, using cassettes and based on the principles of electronic-etheric technology, though not yet submitted to "impartial peer review" and still beset by technical problems, so that the voices from "the other side" are said to sound "like Igor responding to Dr Frankenstein through a closed door on a windy night in Transylvania."

Beans are beneficial

To turn now to items from this side of the ethico-etheric barrier, there were reports at this year's meeting of the American Society for Microbiology suggesting that some of the 7000 cases of crib death occurring yearly in the United States may be due either to a bacterial toxin or to an allergy to common items such as cows' milk, household dust, or fungal spores in the air. From Johns Hopkins come reports that a team of 22 doctors and nurses working for 10 hours separated Emily and Francesca Selvaggio, two Siamese twins joined from chest to upper abdomen, and sharing a common liver as well as umbilical cord, skin, muscles, and ribs. The doctors and nurses were split into two teams, one wearing white gowns and the other blue, so there would be no confusion about which baby they were working on. "After all," said the surgeon "it is not every day that one operates on two people in the same room." The main technical problems arose during the division of the liver and the reconstruction of the intestines, but the girls emerged from surgery in excellent condition and were expected to lead fully normal lives. Meanwhile from the two adjoining mountain towns of Steamboat Springs and Idaho Springs in Colorado come reports of a hundred-fold increased incidence of craniosynostosis (premature fusion of the skull bones), leading investigators to search for possible impurities contaminating the common water supply of these two towns. In Virginia a schoolteacher whose ovarian tubes had been removed gave birth to the first test tube baby ever to be born in the United States; and in California a woman had a baby after being artificially inseminated by sperm delivered by Greyhound bus from the Depository for Germinal Choice, set up in 1979 to make available the genes of Nobel prize winners and other creative, inventive, or intelligent people. And from Georgia come statistics showing that natural childbirth is 50% riskier than was formerly believed, and that if one extends the reporting period beyond the usual 42 days after birth the maternal death rate will be 22.6 (not 15.1) per 100 000, making childbirth the 11th rather than the 28th leading cause of death for women aged 15 to 44.

There are good news in that the incidence of toxic shock has declined by 50% since 1980, though continuing to affect some 50 patients a month, and occurring in a variety of settings other than menstruating women, such as after childbirth and therapeutic abortions, surgical wound infection, deep abscesses and

infective cuts, burns, abrasions, lacerations, and insect bites. There have also been fears that a recent epidemic of chickenpox could cause a corresponding increase in Reye's syndrome, especially in children taking aspirin: so that many alarmed mothers called their pediatricians and, although the role of aspirins remained unproved, were advised to use paracetamol instead.

Then there is also a new biodegradable form of artificial skin made from a cellophane-like material derived from animal proteins and sugars, which can be used to treat burns and may even be grafted inside the body. Some Jehovah's Witnesses, who on religious grounds object to transfusions, are now being treated with artificial blood made from a substance called perfluorodecalin, a chemical cousin to the non-stick coating used on kitchen pans, and manufactured by a Japanese company under the name of Fluosol. Also this year an immunodeficient boy celebrated his tenth birthday inside a plastic isolator playing with sterilised toys and eating a germ-free cake. And beans, despite the prejudices of Pythagoras, are proving beneficial after all, and may yield an enzyme capable of converting type B blood to type O, thus relieving the headaches currently afflicting many blood bank directors.

Finally, we have heard much about the "magnificent obsession" of millionaire Jack Dreyfus, the founder of a highly successful investment fund, who has spent decades and millions of dollars trying to persuade the public that doctors have overlooked the potential capabilities of sodium phenytoin. After years of "research" on this subject, Dreyfus has become convinced that phenytoin should be widely prescribed for hypertension, cardiac problems, hypoglycaemia, depression, "neuralgia," leg ulcers, severe burns, headache, stomach distress, neck pains, and irascibility. He has compiled several expensively produced compendia listing all the research ever carried out on phenytoin, has mailed copies to all of America's 350 000 doctors as well as to the Food and Drug Administration, to the Park Davis Corporation, and to every president from Lyndon Johnson onwards; and he is currently appealing to the American public, because his conscience keeps him going and he just cannot walk away from other people's sufferings.²

References

- ¹ Burnham JC. American medicine's golden age: what happened to it? *Science* 1982;215:1474-9.
- ² Sun M. Book touts Dilantin for depression. *Science* 1982;215:951-2.

Is there any evidence that carrots have anticarcinogenic properties?

Carrots, and to a lesser extent many green leafy vegetables, contain carotene or related carotenoids, or both, which can be converted to vitamin A within the gastrointestinal tract. There is evidence that vitamin A deficiency favours the development of certain forms of cancer in both experimental animals and man—particularly lung cancer in the case of man. There is little to suggest, however, that vitamin A in doses over and above those needed to correct a deficiency offers further benefit. Indeed, in high dosage vitamin A is toxic. In so far as the conversion of carotenoids to vitamin A in the gut becomes less efficient as the dietary level increases, vitamin A toxicity is much less likely to be a complication of a high intake of carrots. The possibility that carotenoids per se offer protection against cancer—that is, by a mechanism that does not depend on their conversion to vitamin A—was recently discussed.¹ This interesting speculation is presently the subject of a current epidemiological study in the United States. Further references are contained in a recent leading article.²—FRANCIS J C ROE, independent consultant in toxicology and cancer research, London.

- ¹ Peto R, Buckley JD, Sporn MB. Can dietary beta carotene materially reduce human cancer rates. *Nature* 1981;290:201-8.
- ² Anonymous. Vitamin A, retinol, carotene, and cancer prevention. *Br Med J* 1980;281:957-8.