Sometime in 1979, my father, Dr. Robert S. (Zalman Shaul) Mendelsohn (1926–1988), traveled from his Chicago home to Brooklyn for some speaking engagements. He spoke to two audiences of women only, one night in Williamsburg, and one in Boro Park. My sister Sally was there, and she recalls that the mostly Chassidic audience—200 or so each night—gave him a warm reception. As an observant Jew himself, he often spoke fondly of those evenings.

At the time, my father’s book, Confessions of a Medical Heretic, was on its way to becoming a bestseller. I could find no written report of those evenings, but I imagine he would have told the ladies how he began to question modern medicine. He started his career as a board-certified pediatrician in a North Michigan Avenue practice in Chicago, but became disillusioned when patients whose tonsils he had irradiated—standard practice in the early 1950s—came back to him with cancer of the thyroid. Even the once-ubiquitous tonsillectomy at the time had mostly been abandoned due to its unacceptably high mortality rate.
Other doctor-induced disasters followed. Women who were prescribed DES during pregnancy to help prevent miscarriages found that not only was it ineffective for that purpose, but the daughters who were born to them had a higher risk of infertility, and even of developing a rare form of vaginal cancer.

Dad began to doubt much of what he had learned in medical school. Although medicine claimed to be based in science, to my father it looked more like a religion, and an idolatrous one. He called it the Church of Modern Medicine, noting that it had high priests (doctors, especially surgeons); holy waters (fluoridation, silver nitrate drops in the eyes of newborn infants, etc.); and ritual mutilation (unnecessary surgery). He criticized the over-prescription of antibiotics, and warned against unnecessary mastectomies, hysterectomies, and C-sections.

My father loved to contrast the Torah’s “choose life” with modern medicine’s “death with dignity.” He encouraged Jewish doctors to value their own Jewish practices, such as instilling hope in patients by asking them what they wanted for breakfast the next morning, even if the doctor was certain they wouldn’t make it through the night.

He went on to write other popular books, including Male Practice, his book about the medical mistreatment of women, and How to Raise a Healthy Child...In Spite of Your Doctor, in which he argued that doctors paid “lip service” to breastfeeding, but actually were more informed about infant formula, which he called “the granddaddy of all junk food.” His books were controversial—he advocated home birth, raised doubts about the value and safety of routine pediatric care, and taught his patients to avoid surgery and medication whenever possible. Yet his messages were always delivered with humor. He used to joke that obstetricians were like firemen—both rushed in to save lives. But, he added with a wink, the firemen didn’t also set the fires!

This year, almost 30 years after his death, our family launched a website about Dad: thepeoplesdoctor.net.
The site contains a complete set of The People’s Doctor, the newsletter that my father published for 11 years. I love having this collection online because it’s encyclopedic. Whether I want to know about arthritis or yeast infections, heart problems or hyperactivity, I can always check to see what Dad thought about it. Even for treatments that didn’t exist in his time, it’s helpful to see Dad’s approach: question your doctor, read drug package inserts carefully, get a second opinion, try a more natural approach. The website summarizes my father’s views on medication, parenting, hospitalization and surgery, women and medicine, and Judaism and medicine. Each of these sections contains links to some of his writings on these topics, or to articles about his views. You can also see him being interviewed or hear some of his entertaining lectures. A photo archive shows Dad with our family and in public settings. In the Archives section, just choose “video,” “audio,” or “photo” from the dropdown list of media types.

Readers who still remember Dr. Mendelsohn will enjoy the memories. Others will find it a fun and informative introduction to a truly original thinker. In both cases, Dr. Mendelsohn will help you learn how to make better medical decisions and hopefully lead a healthier life.

From the Gemara

L’chaim! The Gemara says (Pesachim, 113a) that Rav told his son Chiya, “Do not ingest any unnecessary drugs.” Rashbam explains, “Rav cautioned his son not to take medicines unnecessarily, since he may develop an addiction to them and squander his money on the addiction’s support. Even if he needs the medicine to treat a disease, he should take it only if there is no other equivalent therapy.”

Rashi adds, “A drug that alleviates an ailment in one part of the body is often harmful for another part of the body.”

In contrast, “a Heaven-sent cure is not accompanied by new threats.” (The Tehillim Treasury, citing the Novominsker Rebbe, Rabbi Nochum Perlow, based on Tehillim 107:20)

Ben Yehuyada also comments on this statement from Rav to his son, saying (loose translation), “Taking a drug is like waging war against a disease. Before one joins battle with an ailment in its early stages he should first attempt diplomatic overtures, i.e., a generally healthful lifestyle.”
Private Practice and Public Service

Dr. Robert S. Mendelsohn had a full-time private pediatric practice at his office on Chicago’s North Michigan Avenue from 1956 to 1967. After that, he continued to see patients of all ages on a consultancy basis at his home.

From 1967 to 1969, Dr. Mendelsohn served as national director of Project Head Start’s medical consultation service. As reported in The New York Times on March 24, 1969, he was forced to resign his Head Start position after he publicly criticized the nation’s public school system, telling a congressional committee that many of the good things the program had achieved were lost to the “intellectually deadening” public school system.

It was that 1969 experience, he said, that made him go public with his complaints about the medical establishment, including the newsletter, the syndicated column, and the radio shows.

The Chicago Tribune quoted a fellow physician in Franklin Park, Ill., as remembering Mendelsohn as a “very pleasant and kind man.” Dr. Gregory White said, “He became a critic because he wanted doctors to be all they should and could be. He was an idealist, not an impractical idealist but one who wanted doctors to live up to the highest ideals of medicine.”

Dr. Mendelsohn often recalled the incident of his being fired with amusement, and even dedicated his first book, Confessions of a Medical Heretic, “to all who gave me career opportunities which led to my present thinking, and to all who denied me opportunities which I mistakenly thought I wanted.”

A longtime supporter of the volunteer breastfeeding support organization, La Leche League International, he served on its medical advisory board and spoke frequently at its conferences.
Dr. Mendelsohn served on several boards and committees, including the Maimonides Award Committee, the boards of the College of Jewish Studies and the Jewish Home for the Aged-BMZ in Chicago, and the National Health Federation (where he served as honorary president from 1981–1982). From the National Nutritional Foods Association, he received the Rachel Carson Memorial Award for his “concerns for the protection of the American consumer and health freedoms.”

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Becoming a Medical Heretic

During the ’60s and ‘70s, Dr. Robert S. Mendelsohn began to refer to himself as a “medical heretic.” He later recalled how he got to be that way:

In the late 1960s, my patients returned to me with diseases that I had previously created. The first group had cancer of the thyroid gland, because, when I was trained as a pediatric resident, we all used X-ray therapy to treat tonsillitis. This led to tens of thousands of cases of thyroid cancer.
“Another group of patients had permanently yellow-green stained teeth from tetracycline given for the treatment of acne."
“And when I was a medical student at the University of Chicago, I participated in experiments where we gave women the female sex hormone diethylstilbestrol (DES) to prevent miscarriages. DES didn’t prevent miscarriages, but it created a generation of sons and daughters with tumors and malformations of the reproductive organs...

“When I first noticed these connections, I thought perhaps that was all past history. Doctors must have learned from their mistakes...

“But, when I look today at diagnostic ultrasound, immunizations, environmental pollution, amniocentesis, hospital deliveries, allergy treatment, and practically everything else in medicine, it is obvious that doctors haven’t changed at all. They are simply making a different, new set of mistakes.” (From Dissent in Medicine, by Dr. Robert S. Mendelsohn)

Even before scientists like Bruce Lipton demonstrated the importance of a baby’s epigenetic connection with his mother, Dr. Mendelsohn was well aware of the physiological importance of a mother’s baby being with her as soon as possible after birth. Here’s a story of Dr. Mendelsohn’s utter respect for what is physiologically best for the mother and baby:

I like mothers and fathers to stay with their children while they’re in the hospital. In one of the hospitals I worked in, parents could stay with the child only if he or she was on the critical list. So I would put all of the kids on the critical list! They left me alone on that for a long time—until the showdown. The visiting hours were supposed to end at 7:30 every evening. One mother called me and said her child was crying but that he would stop crying and go to sleep by 8:30 if only she could stay with him until 8:30. I told her to go up to his room and stay. Then the nurse called me and said that this woman has to leave because the child wasn’t critical and visiting hours were over. I asked her what she would do if the mother decided to stay. She said she’d call the supervisor. I called the supervisor and asked her the same question. She said she’d call the hospital administrator. The administrator called me and I asked him what he planned to do. He said he’d have a police guard come and escort the woman out of the hospital. I asked him to do me a favor and hold off for fifteen minutes so I could see what I could do. He figured I was a nice guy and would take care of it for him, so he agreed. I called up a local TV newsman—an activist—and told him I had a mother who was about to be thrown out of the hospital...
because she wanted to stay with her crying child for an extra hour until he went to sleep. He asked me to hold them off for twenty minutes so he could rush cameras to the scene. I said I’d see what I could do, and I’d get back to him. Then I called up the administrator and asked him to hold off for just twenty minutes more because the TV camera crew was on the way to film the policeman escorting the woman out of the hospital. The administrator said, “All right, Bob, you win. You call off your dogs, and I’ll call off mine. But tomorrow I want to see you in my office.” Next morning I went to his office and he told me he could throw me off the staff for doing what I did. I told him I knew that, but that I also knew that he wasn’t going to do it. Because if he did I would go right to the newspaper and make the biggest fuss he’d ever seen. He said that was right. And he made a deal with me: “Your patients’ visitors can stay as long as they want, but nobody else’s. I don’t want you to bring this up with the rest of the staff.” (From Confessions of a Medical Heretic, by Dr. Robert S. Mendelsohn)

Dr. Mendelsohn heralded advice in his books and lectures that would reinstate the confidence lacking in parents of his time. The premises that form the basis of his advice, as detailed in How to Raise A Healthy Child…In Spite of Your Doctor, are as follows:

- At least 95 percent of the ailments that children are prey to will heal themselves and do not require medical attention.

- 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 needs treatment but gets it anyway and is subjected to the consequences, and it is the parent who gets the relief. That’s because most doctors believe that parents demand, or at least expect, that they will do something for the child. What concerned parents really need is reassurance, and what their kids don’t need is treatment when they aren’t really sick. Most doctors won’t take the time to provide meaningful parental reassurance; it is quicker and easier to write a prescription for the child.
Mother Nature, mothers, grandmothers—yes, 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 the drugs prescribed by pediatricians are unnecessary and a costly risk to the child who takes them. All drugs are toxic and thus dangerous, per se. Beyond that, excessive childhood use of prescription drugs may generate the belief that there is “a pill for every ill.” This may lead the child to seek chemical solutions to emotional problems later in life.

At least 90 percent of children’s surgery is unnecessary, needlessly exposing the patient to the risks of death from the surgery itself, from anesthesia, or from infections contracted in the hospital, which is an inescapably germridden environment.

Most pediatricians have received little or no education covering the fundamentals of nutrition and pharmacology, and no emphasis is placed on these vital subjects in medical school. Their patients suffer because of the pediatrician’s ignorance of the impact of diet on health and of the hazards and side effects of the drugs he prescribes.

Parents need to learn when to call a doctor, and what they can do, without a doctor’s intervention, to reinforce the body’s ability to heal itself.

Suggested Reading


Dr. Mendelsohn has also recommended books by Angela Kilmartin (about some common women’s health issues) and books by midwife Ina May Gaskin about birth.