

Health Matters: Social, economic and philosophical aspects of health care

David J Elpern MD*

Introductory remarks

I would have liked to welcome all of you to "Health Matters," a 4-day conference devoted to the examination of some ethical, social, economic and philosophical aspects of health care.

I have been a medical practitioner for about 20 years now — most of them spent right here on Kauai. Many times each day in my office I feel like a hypocrite. A major reason is because my patients are conditioned to expect a quick fix, drug, procedure or test, while in reality they have problems that cannot be cured or disorders which our medical model cannot handle.

Don't get me wrong. There are phenomenal things we can do for people and to people. The technical component is wondrous. As a dermatologist, I am honored to be able to prescribe Accutane for patients with severe cystic acne. The ophthalmologist is fortunate to have the skills to implant lenses, the orthopedist to replace hips, the pediatric oncologist to cure childhood leukemia; and the list goes on and on. These are great services to humanity.

Medically, these are the best of times; but in some important ways they are also the worst of times. This is because health care is about much more than just procedures and drugs and the selling of products. Only a small percentage of our patients really need the technical component. Franz Ingelfinger, an erstwhile editor of the *New England Journal of Medicine*, estimated that 80% of the people who enter a physician's door will do quite well with reassurance alone. The great majority of people who present themselves to doctors will not benefit from the MRI, the organ transplant, the powerful designer drug. Most just need a place to talk, someone to listen attentively; not someone to *talk at them*, or worse yet, someone to do something to them. Andre Dubus, an author, put it very well when he wrote, "There was a time when I believed I could help people by talking to them. I became a confidant, and I listened and talked a lot and never helped anyone at all. So now if someone comes to me, I offer what I know I can give: the friendship of a listening face."

This has become scripture for me. So here I am, a physician, a medical doctor (someone said: MD stands for Medical Deity), opening this convocation. A bit pompous, because this program is also for nurses, social workers, psychologists, all other allied health professionals, and, importantly, the public. I am not the captain of this ship. We are all passengers here, fellow travelers, gathered to listen to some "experts", to learn and to share our experiences.

This program was a joint effort of a number of individuals: Jan Carmichael, from the Kauai Rural Health Program, put in long hours in the planning stage and worked tirelessly on the nursing accreditation. Carol Rice, self-effacingly, from the Kauai Department of Health, was at Jan's side the whole time. Vicki Shambaugh, from the Pacific Health Research Institute, was involved with the

project since the early stages. She has been an important liaison with the Hawaii Medical Association and the University of Hawaii.

Some of "Health Matters" emanated from my acute "disease" with my role as a high-priest of medical science. Recently, I have started to recognize that nurses are the real care-givers in our health care system (it took me a long time to see the obvious). When will we, as physicians, start to share our largess with them?

A few years ago, I began to appreciate just how often I was selling procedures, drugs, examinations to my patients. This is most often accomplished by scaring the public. Our medical organizations, as well as the media, the pharmaceutical industry and other groups who stand to gain from all of this, fuel the fire. Health care is an industry—a business, the MEDICAL-INDUSTRIAL COMPLEX. From these thoughts the program for the first day evolved. The title of our first speaker Arthur Barsky, MD's book says it all: *Worried Sick: Our Troubled Quest for Wellness*. In the morning, we will cover that, as well as *Practicing Prevention*, a subject which Marc LaForce MD has admirably addressed in his work and writings.

In the afternoon, we added a workshop entitled, "A Culturally Sensitive Approach to Hawaiian Health Care." This is the brainchild of Jan and Rick Carmichael (Rick is the Director of the Nursing Program at Kauai Community College). Our speakers, Lynette and Richard Paglinawan, and Rev Moses Keale are well qualified to address this subject.

That first evening in Lihue, we co-sponsored a lecture: "Star Wars vs Peace" by Victor Sidel MD. Dr Sidel was a co-founder of Physicians for Social Responsibility 30 years ago. He graciously agreed to address this subject for Kauai's public and our registrants. Some of you may not be aware that our paradisaical bit of the firmament has been selected by the military as a site for a sophisticated offensive missile system. This multibillion dollar project may be thrust upon Kauai. However, a courageous local group, Responsible Citizens for Responsible Government, has challenged the military on its decision and may help rescue our island.

The defense industry has great parallels with the health care industry. Here, too, the public—in this case, taxpayers—are frightened into approving monstrously large expenditures for weapons systems by those who benefit directly from them: the military, the arms manufacturers and other special interest groups. The current crisis in the Soviet Union is undoubtedly welcomed by these groups. Victor Sidel will comment on this situation. We'll find out if he agrees with England's former Prime Minister Churchill who said in 1939, "I cannot forecast to you the action of Russia. It is a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma."

The second day we will consider issues of quality, cost, outcome and appropriateness of care. Fred Gilbert MD and Vicki Shambaugh

This article was mistakenly omitted from the July 1992 issue of the Journal. /Ed.

* The Kauai Foundation for Continuing Education, Kalaheo, Hawaii
"Health Matters" Presented at a conference on Kauai, August 23, 1991.

MPH from the Pacific Health Research Institute have been the leaders in this field in our state for quite some time. They orchestrated this day.

Medical care consumes over \$650 billion per year in the U.S. How much of this care is really necessary? Medicine is about being a helper, not the stuff of business. Osler said, "The practice of medicine is an art, not a trade; a calling, not a business. . . Often the best part of [y]our work will have nothing to do with potion or powders." Is this true today? . . . Jackie Kosecoff PhD and Robert Brook MD are singularly well qualified to address the subject of just what it is in the medical armamentarium that is essential.

Day 3, a Sunday, will be appropriately devoted to looking at the spiritual and social aspects of health care. The Rev David Turner, pastor of the Kapaa United Church of Christ, will start this day at 7:15 am with a non-denominational service here at the Waiohai on the grassy area in front of the Terrace Restaurant. Mitsuo Aoki PhD, Professor *Emeritus*, Department of Religion at UH, Vic Sidel MD and Reed Tuckson MD, President of Drew College in LA, will follow in the morning session and consider some important, non-technical aspects of healers and healing. This will be a mind-expanding session.

On Monday, the final day, the subject of women in health care will be addressed. Medicine is a paternalistic, male-dominated profession. Yet, caring is a maternal quality. I have learned more about care-giving from nurses (most of whom are women) than from the scientists who formed me as a physician. Maybe the next generations of doctors will be selected in a new mode.

Ruth Sidel PhD, Professor of Sociology at Hunter College in New York, Leonard Stein MD, Professor of Psychiatry at Wisconsin and

Hob Osterlund RN MS at Queen's Medical Center will address this compelling subject. This session would not have been possible without the help of Jan and Rick Carmichael.

The sunrises and sunsets have been great recently and the moon will be full. To paraphrase Matthew Arnold: "The moon lies fair upon the sea tonight, glimmering and vast out in the tranquil bay." Do not miss it. Being here should be much more than just being a student. Getting to know and appreciate Kauai will help to put it all into perspective. As a colleague of mine said to me: "How many would have come if this were in Tulsa?"

It is a great pleasure to have all of you here. Thank you so much for coming. I am confident that all of you will learn much of value here. Get to know one another. This will be a great time to exchange information and experiences.

"Health Matters" didn't just happen. There was a lot of planning, and there were expenses to meet. Most programs such as this are heavily underwritten by special interest groups, pharmaceutical houses, professional organizations, manufacturers of equipment. None of these were asked to sponsor this program.

We were fortunate to receive some financial support from The Kauai Rural Health Program, the County of Kauai, Island Care Health Plan, Wilcox Hospital and The Queen's Medical Center. Even with all of this, we have not covered all of our costs. I encourage our Kauai registrants who can afford it to contribute small amounts to our Foundation. Your help will enable us to meet our expenses and host similar programs in the future.



SPECIALIZE IN AIR FORCE MEDICINE.

Become the dedicated physician you want to be while serving your country in today's Air Force. Discover the tremendous benefits of Air Force medicine. Talk to an Air Force medical program manager about the quality lifestyle, quality benefits and 30 days of vacation with pay per year that are part of a medical career with the Air Force. Find out how to qualify. Call

USAF HEALTH PROFESSIONALS
TOLL FREE
1-800-423-USAF

