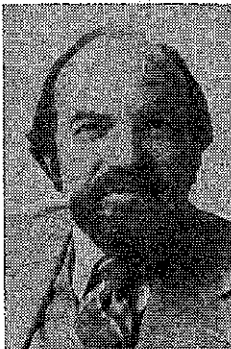


Editor's Page

Legislating Character

Increasingly by the day, ever more specific regulations are issued by various governmental agencies that spell out what is permissible and what is not. We now have not only ugly signs in pharmacies with the prices of commonly dispensed drugs, but have also regulated auto repairs and bump shops no less than the practice of medicine. In a complex society there is no escape from the need to establish minimum standards for many of our activities, because the opportunities for abuse, misrepresentation, chicanery and plain fraud are enormous. But, in the understandable eagerness of legislators to protect the helpless and hapless consumer we often lose sight of the fact that every person has some responsibility to protect himself and that every individual has some responsibility to adhere to at least minimum standards of integrity. Regulations of every aspect of our living have shifted the emphasis, and many individuals now expect to be protected, compensated, looked-after, and cared for, without themselves taking an active role in such actions.



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REGULATIONS OF EVERY ASPECT OF OUR LIVING HAVE SHIFTED THE EMPHASIS, AND MANY INDIVIDUALS NOW EXPECT TO BE PROTECTED, COMPENSATED, LOOKED-AFTER, AND CARED FOR, WITHOUT THEMSELVES TAKING AN ACTIVE ROLE IN SUCH ACTIONS.

Drive up and down Hamilton, Woodward Avenue or many other major thoroughfares of our twisted and tortured city and the futility of this approach will stand out in bold evidence. Burned out hulks of stores and buildings are to be found literally on every block, and young vandals, black and white, have come to believe that glass windows of empty stores and buildings exist mainly for their entertainment and to provide them with targets for stone shooting practice. Many buildings have not a single pane of glass left unbroken, for such property destruction goes unchallenged and unpunished. Small wonder that life

begins to look cheap to such vandals. Such attitudes could not have become acceptable behavior in some sub-cultures had it not been for the false assumption that exploitation, humiliation and discriminations of the past are correctable by tolerating the breaking of civilized codes in the present. Black rage and white guilt have stupidly combined to make this possible. The wasting lives of gang members and those many others who silently accept and thus condone such lawlessness are the real victims. Loose living and absence of internal controls have also sapped the vitality of the City itself, whose condition must sadly be labeled critical.

"Caveat emptor" used to be a basic tenet of our society—let the buyer beware. No one can protect a person against his own folly. Character cannot be legislated nor can it be seduced into decency by bribery and governmental grants. It has to be built slowly and patiently from within, in a painstaking process that takes place in the family. This is where the real breakdown has occurred, in the middle-class no less than among the poor. This is where it will have to be repaired.

In Detroit, more so than elsewhere, hundreds of thousands expect someone else to protect them and to care for them regardless of their own deeds, for ours is basically

still a factory town with a strong union mentality. But in all cities everywhere, the middle-class as well as the poor want more for less, accept unemployment and welfare checks without shame even when employment is available, and speak with pride and glee of their success in out-maneuvering the Establishment. Existing at the expense of society without contributing to it used to be shameful. Many now consider it a clever and honorable achievement.

In this atmosphere it is understandable that physicians, too, often lose their sense of perspective and proportion. Since everybody is grabbing, why not we? Since we are at the mercy of bitter, apathetic, disillusioned, unpleasant and angry individuals, whose individual personality quirks are protected by job security and a sense of righteousness, how can we forever continue to maintain good manners, genuine concern for another human and moderation in fees? Since we, physicians, are being abused by the press, by legislators and by third-party payers, can we be blamed for trying to get away with as much as possible, like everybody else?

And yet, "noblesse oblige." As a profession we better learn soon to organize in a union-like force so we will not be pushed around. But as individuals, in our fee policies and in our treatment of our patients' time and fears—we better remember that, like all others, we become the first victims of our own abuse.

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