

The Measure Of A Man

The Medicaid scandals should not surprise anyone, especially not those, such as the *New York Times*, who for years repeatedly advocated the expansion of this and related programs. Between three and seven billion dollars are apparently being wasted, stolen or otherwise spent uselessly every year. The figures are so enormous that they defy easy comprehension, and it is best to actually observe them: \$3,000,000,000 to \$7,000,000,000. Physicians and others who provide "medical care" are human and therefore corruptible, and when 15,000,000,000 dollars are available annually for distribution it is understandable that many will grab for it and attempt to get as much as they can from it for themselves, with or without justification.



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The very huge size of the Medicaid budget insures that both medical and financial responsibilities are diffuse and hard to pinpoint. A private physician's office by contrast, with all its shortcomings, seems refreshingly blissful. It and its problems are human in size. The patient has an address and a person to bring his medical and administrative complaints to, and the physician knows clearly which patients he is responsible for and from whom he derives his livelihood. If Medicaid is a calamity, what a hellish nightmare the contemplated National Health Insurance program would surely be.

Having recognized all this, it was still most shocking to learn how extreme the abuses were. Blood pressures were obtained through clothing, allegedly because some physicians did not want to touch "dirty" patients. One man with an egg-sized lesion in his oral cavity had allegedly seen six physicians before even one bothered to ask him to open his mouth, yet all charging for their services. Some physicians padded their bank accounts to the tune of several hundred thousand dollars while providing unacceptable and shoddy medicine, all in the guise of being the defenders of inner-city blacks and the poor. Something basic must have gone wrong in medical education and in the bringing up of the young, including those who eventually applied for admission into medical schools.

One of the most honored terms that Jews designate a person with is "Mensch." In Yiddish and German, a Mensch is simply a man, but the term has evolved to mean a whole lot more than that. It denotes a person who truly respects himself and others, one who in an immediate and personal sense knows that Man is created in the image of God, and who would not diminish his humanity by engaging in deceitful or petty practices, nor would he willfully hurt another human being. A Mensch is not a saint, and being human, he is full of errors, shortcomings and imperfections. But, he has the courage of his convictions, he is firm yet kind, principled but not rigid.

In emphasizing the science of medicine, medical schools have often forgotten that a physician is more than a competent expert, knowing the workings of the body. He also ought to be a trusted friend and a counselor, capable and willing to stand by and help patients not only with their illnesses but also with their fears. Medical schools seem not to concern themselves enough with the human qualities of the medical student. Corrupt and unprincipled individuals with the best that medical schools offer today will become corruptible and unprincipled physicians. The emphasis needs serious and urgent reconsideration and rethinking. Unless basic changes are instituted we will continue to graduate highly competent technicians with a tremendously rich and very important pool of information, qualified to "manage" sick patients, but unable to serve them as physicians.

Politicians and reformers will undoubtedly continue to push for an expansion of medical services to please the population, thus increasing the opportunities for graft and for the practice of mechanistic medicine. Whether we succeed in stemming this tide or not, it is our responsibility to make sure that yardsticks and principles exist in the personalities of physicians that will make it impossible for them to participate in indefensible and unacceptable practices.

Words have lost much of their meaning and value in the inflationary spiral, just as many other commodities have. Yet, the word "hallowed" in its original sense of holy and revered still fits the traditions of the medical profession. The armamentarium of the old physician was meager and his knowledge was scant. Yet, he was generally respected and looked up to, for he was a Mensch. The prestige and position of the modern physician, and eventually also his income, cannot endure for long unless he, too, develops the human qualities that precede and supercede any amount of technical knowledge.

Admission committees and deans of medical schools should be at least as concerned with the quality of the applicants as human beings as they are with their grades. Modern medicine has succeeded in prolonging the average life expectancy of individuals, but we will have failed in our tasks anyway if in doing so we lose those sterling qualities of character that make medicine a calling rather than a business, and that make life worth living. The real question ought not to be how long Man lives, but *how* he lives.

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