

## HERMAN WIGODSKY: "YOU WANT TO DO WHAT TO ME?"

### LECTURE SERIES REPORT BY ARNOLD KOROTKIN

The need to examine our nation's health care system is an acute issue. In 1989, Americans spent over \$600 billion for health care, which represents approximately 12% of our country's Gross National Product. These costs represent a continuing pattern of escalating expenditures which have outpaced inflation in recent years, exacerbated by the following problems:

- 37 million Americans are without any type of health care insurance;
- there is a critical shortage of nurses;
- modern medical technology and various medical 'miracles' come at a high price;
- the AIDS crisis strains the limits of current health care resources;
- our country's aging population is faced with increasing medical problems.

As an initial step toward examining the nature of the health care system, Dr. Herman Wigodsky, Clinical Professor at the University of Texas spoke on Thursday, December 14, 1989 as part of the lecture series sponsored by the Institute for Critical Thinking. The session was entitled "You Want to Do *What* to Me?"

The focus of Dr. Wigodsky's presentation was the education of individuals preparing for careers in the medical profession. He suggested that medical schools in reality are primarily trade schools where one learns a craft and obtains the tools of the trade. However, in the course of this educational process little is done to challenge the students as people. Dr. Wigodsky further contended that once in the profession, grants turn researchers into "private entrepreneurs," further detaching the practitioner from the patient and de-personalizing the nature of medical care.

In order to reverse the current state of medical education and to produce a 'new breed' of medical practitioner, Dr. Wigodsky suggested that students preparing for the medical professions should, in their undergraduate studies:

- be provided with a background in philosophy and an understanding of health care ethics;
- have an understanding of the social structure of the health care system and appreciate the relationships between the medical system and other institutions, i.e., political, social and economic;

- have a sense of compassion as well as knowledge and understanding of how people interact;
- acquire an historical perspective regarding the evolution of the medical profession and health care system as we know it today.

Then, medical students and professionals need to take responsibility for their actions and ask the question "What am I doing and to whom?" so as not to violate their patients' rights.

It is essential that professional and pre-professional medical education begin to seriously address the issues raised by Dr. Wigodsky. A critical examination of current educational approaches is a keystone to the transformation of our health care delivery system. This examination will hopefully generate a 'new breed' of multi-dimensional medical practitioners who have not only mastered the tools of their trade, but who are also equipped to address the social, political and economic issues they and their patients face on a daily basis.

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So where does all this leave the budding critical thinker? On the one hand, obviously, the process of critical thinking itself generated the questions raised in the symposium and made possible the formulation of the answers summarized here. On the other hand, neither the process nor the outcomes of critical thinking as such seem, on the evidence presented in these papers, to have played a particularly noticeable role in either the development or the transformation of actual authority relations in contemporary societies. Rather, impersonal and global societal processes are largely responsible for outcomes, both more and less positive,

that are beyond the scope of deliberate and rational human control.

If that is the case, then the chief contribution of critical thinking in the social sciences may be to sharpen our perception of and appreciation for these processes; critical thinking is not in itself likely to facilitate or retard the processes in any tangible fashion. But as the political events unfolding in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union have demonstrated, we, academics and citizens alike, may find in this ample cause for satisfaction.

*William Batkay is Chair of the Department of Political Science at MSC.*

#### **To the Editor:**

I want you to know how energizing Dr. Herman Wigodsky's lecture was for me. It was astonishing to hear an M.D. speak of allowing patients autonomy and treating them with beneficence and justice. I immediately generalized and applied those concepts to my own profession. The end of the semester at hand, a time of summing-up, his remarks led me to reconsider how much autonomy I had allowed my students — or encouraged them to develop. And, in reviewing the semester's work, I considered whether I had used processes that were beneficent and whether I had treated *all* my students justly. I found myself squirming a little.

*Celia Martyn, Department of English*