Cousins' Account of Self-Cure Rapped

A New York City University sociologist has been taking the medical profession to task for allowing itself to be impressed by Norman Cousins' famed account of his self-cure from a collagen disease. Florence A. Ruderman, who describes the case in a forthcoming book on medicine, science, and society, has branded Cousins' account as an "illogical, deceptive, self-serving production" which raises more questions than it answers.

The Cousins story started in 1964 when the then-editor of the *Saturday Review* returned from a trip to the Soviet Union with stiffness in his limbs and nodules on his neck and hands. Tests resulted in a tentative diagnosis of ankylosing spondylitis, a degenerative disease of the connective tissue. After suffering adverse reactions to most of the drugs he was given, Cousins decided, with the cooperation of his doctor, to take matters into his own hands. Recalling various articles he had read about the positive qualities ascribed to vitamin C, and the salubrious effect of positive emotions, Cousins checked out of the hospital and into a hotel. He went off all his drugs and arranged a regimen of regular, large intravenous injections of vitamin C. He also arranged for showings of laugh-provoking films, and he read amusing books. This treatment, he found, resulted in a gradual withdrawal of symptoms. He gradually regained most freedom of movement.

The world did not hear about the case until Cousins described his experience in an article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 1976. The response was overwhelming. Cousins relates in his 1979 best seller, *Anatomy of an Illness*, that he received 3000 letters from doctors praising him for taking an active role as a patient and illustrating the importance of positive emotions in healing. The story of the Cousins' self-cure soon achieved a firm place in the lore of holistic medicine, and Cousins himself achieved almost overnight status as a medical expert. Five medical schools offered him faculty positions. He is currently an adjunct professor in medical humanities at the University of California in Los Angeles.

Ruderman, who discussed the case in an article published in *Commentary* last year, subjected almost every element of the story to withering criticism. She states first that the diagnosis was never certain. Cousins said that his doctors told him his disease was "progressive and incurable"; in fact, recovery from ankylosing spondylitis is possible. Ruderman says that far from being scientific, Cousins arbitrarily chose writings from the scientific literature that supported his preconceived notions, just as he arbitrarily traced the origin of the disease to a combination of stress-induced "adrenal exhaustion" and heavy metal poisoning from inhalation of diesel fumes while in the Soviet Union. Ruderman, who is not a medical sociologist, concludes that Cousins offered no evidence whatsoever that he conquered a dangerous illness with willpower and vitamin C and says his disease might well have been an acute attack of arthritis which subsided naturally.

Although harshly critical of Cousins, Ruderman made it clear at a speech in October at the New York Academy of Medicine that her real target is the medical community. She noted scornfully that the *New England Journal of Medicine* almost never publishes articles by laymen. "If Joe Blow of Altoona" had sent in such an article, "it wouldn't even get the courtesy of a rejection," she alleged. She was appalled that doctors who wrote in hailed Cousins as a "true scientist" and never raised questions about the unquestioning compliance of his doctor. What responsibility would he have had, for example, if Cousins had died during his unorthodox treatment? Ruderman believes the Cousins story illustrates a "strange readiness" on the part of doctors "to abandon the canons of science" as well as

Norman Cousins

Hailed by thousands of physicians

"an eagerness for easy answers" and "a desire for gurus and celebrities who pretend to criticize but pander to medicine's worst features."

In the article in *Commentary*, Ruderman wrote, "what is sought . . . in 'laymen's contributions,' is what consciously or unconsciously corroborates or panders to medical prejudices or stereotypes; in this instance, the comforting assurance that patients can cure themselves, if only they will 'think positively.' " Ruderman thinks Cousins' contribution in the long run will be damaging to doctor-patient relationships. Once doctors finally realize he has written a "phony book," she says, it will reinforce the attitude that patients should not be listened to.

Ruderman's attack was followed by another, last summer, by a friend of Cousins, Sidney Kahn of Mount Sinai School of Medicine. In an article in the *Mount Sinai Journal of Medicine*, Kahn, who died before publication, accused Cousins of "reckless use of scientific terminology and the citing of irrelevant references to substantiate arbitrary beliefs. . . ."

Called by *Science*, Cousins reacted indignantly to the reported criticism. He said that it looked as though Ruderman were reaching outside her field of expertise by quibbling about his diagnosis: "she did not examine me," he noted. He added that as far as the nature and prognosis of his illness were concerned he only reported what his doctors told him. He said available knowledge did not conflict with conclusions from his medical detective work and insisted that in any case he does not regard himself as a medical expert. (He lectures students at UCLA on the doctor-patient relationship as reflected in literature and philosophy.) He indicated that the criticism in no way detracted from the point of his tale which was to demonstrate the importance of the doctor-patient alliance and the fact that the patient is his own best healer.

—CONSTANCE HOLDEN

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