

YEAR FOR BLEEDING HEARTS AND RX FOR MEDICAL CARE

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As we start the New Year, there is a strong inclination to predict it will be a banner one for the bleeding heart fraternity. The dragging out of peace negotiations and resumption of air strikes against North Vietnam have already reactivated the political and professional hand wringers who cannot bear to suffer in absentia for the selected victims of special wars. But apart from that, there are other signs, especially in the fields of health and medicine, to indicate that a major assault upon emotions is shaping up.

Premonitory warnings pointing in this direction appeared in December when an HEW study commission reported that it had discovered tricycles unsafe—over 130,000 tricycle accidents annually are due to faulty design and reckless pedaling on the part of immature operators. Other worrisome statistics to bring anguish to those concerned citizens who agonize over such things are a mercury-poisoned swordfish and the dangers of pop top beer cans.

Then to spread a little pre-Christmas cheer, the NBC telecasters examined the medical "crisis" in the United States in an hour-long program, "What Price Health?" It was an updated rehash of previous CBS programs recycling standard gripes about doctors, medicine and high costs, documenting new sob stories, and plugging health care as a "right" for all.

The indications are that—in line with a long existing campaign to create public dissatisfaction with America's diverse but functional health care system—protecting the citizenry from the health hazards of daily living and their pocketbooks from the unfeeling gougers providing health services will be major issues in 1973. Senator Kennedy already has staked his private claim in the health field and apparently considers it essential to his political future.

Overall, however, there are some strange contradictions both in the manipulated attitude of the public and in the attitude of those who feed on the health care issue. While conditioning the public to demand and expect that the most costly and sophisticated care can be made available to all, the accomplishments of modern medicine are being undermined by the naive acceptance of medieval practices and a call for returning to Nature as a healer. The desire for all of the fantastically complicated electronic and plastic miracles of heart-lung bypass systems competes with the wishful longing to be a Chinese peasant with an acupuncture needle stuck into one wrist, who munches an apple while undergoing lung surgery. The pregnant woman is assured that ultra-technical chromosome culture and genetic counseling will eliminate the possibility of any

abnormal child at the same time that she is urged to accept a return of the granny-midwife and be delivered at home. A generation of uneducated youngsters prefer to trust the knowledge of high priests of food faddism and drug apologists to that of Harvard nutritionists and Cornell pharmacologists but still expect to be rescued in emergency by the latest antibiotics and cardiac resuscitation techniques. The physician in private practice is declared obsolete, but medical schools are urged to turn out more primary physicians whose role is to bring care to the public on a person-to-person basis. The inflated costs of all medical services are pointed to with horror while suggesting remedies and programs that will quadruple such costs.

The confusion is promoted and compounded by radio, press releases and TV reporting. According to NBC, there are terrible inequities in the distribution of health care. The system is "chaotic," health conditions are "abysmal," five thousand communities have no doctors or health facilities, patients are "duped or neglected," the "symbol of medicine is not the caduceus but the dollar sign," and even the very wealthy can't find a doctor on call on weekends.

Whether the "crisis" lies in medicine or in the bias and caliber of those who report on it, it will probably deepen in 1973. Our prognosis for TV network reporters is grave; heart bleeding and chest pain incident to a contagious and virulent form of breast beating will worsen; Thurber's disease, coreopsis, may soon set in. In sympathy we offer only the advice printed on a bumper sticker of the plum colored Cadillac parked outside the St. Francis Hospital emergency room:

DOCTOR JESUS STILL MAKES HOUSE CALLS

. . . But don't call on Sundays, you might get The Answering Service.

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