

The Silent World of Doctor and Patient

by Jay Katz, M.D.

New York: The Free Press, 1984, 229 pages, 15.95

In this short, clear and concise work, Jay Katz critically examines the concept of a physician's authority over patients. Katz is best known for his encyclopedic body of work on the legal and ethical issues involved in human experimentation (see for example his *Experimentation with Human Beings*, Russell Sage Foundation, 1972).

In this, his latest book, he asks the reader to question with him some of the most basic conceptions of the traditional philosophy of medicine and medical ethics, and the cornerstone of medical practice, the physician-patient relationship. His "ultimate conclusion" is that a radical shift must take place in our thinking about decision-making in the medical context: that physicians must share with patients the "burden of decision." His purpose in this provocative and powerful book is clearly stated and compellingly drawn: "to initiate a more enlightened debate about the respective rights, duties and needs of physicians and patients in their intimate, anxiety-producing and fateful encounters with one another."

Katz begins by stating that disclosure, sharing of information and genuine conversation have never been seen as the norm for the physician-patient relationship. Even into the twentieth century, the history of this relationship is what Katz calls a "history of silence." The norms governing this encounter were dependent on the physician's maintaining this code of silence. It is only through the birth and development of the legal concept of informed consent (1957) that this history of silence receives its first historical challenge. And, as Katz argues, since the early 1970's there has been no real development in the law of informed consent. In fact, there is some evidence of a "retreat" from the radical changes entailed by this concept. Katz sees the doctrine of informed consent as little more than a "call to liberty" which has "only created an

atmosphere in which freedom has the potential to survive and grow." It is for him a "mirage" which both "deceives" and "sustains hope"; and is better than no vision at all."

Katz then proceeds to outline the real (and largely unexplored) challenges facing health care providers: sharing authority, respecting autonomy and, the most difficult of all, "acknowledging uncertainty." Katz uses carefully selected and richly portrayed cases of individual doctors and patients and uses his ability as an analyst to look at underlying psychodynamics beneath the surface in setting out this provocative agenda.

One of the most interesting examples of these skills is Katz's ability to see into the psychological aspects of the physician-patient encounter and conclude that physicians in their face-to-face encounters with patients engage in a systematic (and largely unconscious) "disregard of uncertainty."

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Katz finds that physicians are more than willing to discuss the limitations when they encounter patients. Katz argues that one of the most significant legacies of modern scientific medicine is that of modern physicians are better "situated than they have (ever) been to make distinctions between the known, the unknown, and the unknowable." For the first time in history, science has given us the knowledge that would allow for not only a clear definition and disclosure of ignorance and uncertainty, but for a genuine sharing of the burdens of decision-making in the light of these limitations.

In his final chapter he brings this

agenda to its culmination by arguing that to retreat from the goal of this "wider conversation" to the traditions of silence and authority is to risk the psychological abandonment of those who seek help, especially those who are critically ill or dying.

Katz is aware of the radical nature of his vision of the physician-patient relationship. His work adds important insights to an expanding corpus of work in philosophy/ethics and psychology/sociology that seriously questions the idea that physicians should be "trusted" to make decisions for patients; that "doctor knows (and does) best"; and, that good patient "follows faithfully the "doctors orders." He closes his book with a call for a crucial first step in this long process of transformation and reform: that both physicians and patients "first learn to trust each other."

As a physician and laborer in clinical ethics, I found this book to be insightful, critical, provocative, challenging, and ultimately, a call for a new level of caring; for a new ethic of relationship in the "world of doctor and patient."

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Article Wins Award

"Nurse, Patient, and Physician," *Midwest Medical Ethics* 2:3, Summer 1986, by Leonie Palikkathayil and Gail Harkness received a Certificate of Award at the Midwestern Region 2 Conference for Sigma Theta Tau, an international nursing honor society.