

Quotes From the News

By UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL
Vatican City—Dr. Geoffrey G. Fisher, Archbishop of Canterbury, commenting on the "cold war" that has existed between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism since the Reformation:
"That period is not altogether past, but it is passing."

New Orleans—The spokesman for a group offering to help white parents bring their children to an integrated school:
"People call up volunteering to do anything. They even want to go over there to the school in big groups. But that would be a terrible mistake. I'm afraid all hell might break loose."

Artesia, N.M.—Mrs. Elizabeth Matthew discussing her successful custody battle to keep Blackie, her pet crow:
"He is one happy little crow to be home. He was very tired after going to court."

The Medical Roundup

by *Walter Alvarez*
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(Register and Tribune Syndicate, 1960)

Polarized Words That Cause Great Pain

Every so often I get a letter—and sometimes a very bitter and angry one—from someone who accuses me of having deliberately hurt her by using in my column some ordinary word for a disease—a word which sears her like a hot iron. Why?

Because for years she has watched her child suffering from this disease. Her accusation distresses me because I was brought up by two gentle folk—my father and my mother—who always, in our home, spoke with kindness and courtesy. Perhaps as a result, all my life I have been much averse to hurting anyone.

If I do keep using in this column the good old English names for three or four dread diseases, I have a reason for doing it. I am not doing it from ignorance or ill will. Some 60 years ago my father, an able physician, used to say to me that if a woman brought in her epileptic child for treatment, and the words epilepsy or fits were mentioned, she would leave, hurt and angry, and would not come back. Hence, already in that early day, wise physicians told the mother, as many do today, that the disease certainly wasn't epilepsy, and it wasn't hereditary; it was just seizures or muscle spasms or fainting spells. "When the girl grew up she could marry and have as many children as she wanted to have," they said. Today, a physician who sees a child with a severe epilepsy may tell the mother that it is all due to a low blood sugar, and then she loves him for this evasion of the truth. Why do I say evasion? Because at Mayo's the neurologists looked for a low blood sugar in over 2,000 cases of people with seizures and failed to find a case.

My father used to go on and tell me that Hippocrates, the Greek "Father of Medicine," who wrote about 430 B.C., had similar troubles. But because he was a brave man with strong principles, and because he deeply resented the way in which the public then regarded epilepsy—as a specially bad disease in which a god struck the person down, or a demon entered into him—he kept talking about the trouble, struggling always to get people to see that it is no different from any other disease. It is due to some little thing gone wrong in the brain, and a god or a demon has nothing to do with it.

Some persons who write me to complain but who do it with calm and urbanity say that I ought never to use the common words: always I should use substitutes of recent origin. These people are like those many who, having once gone through the great sorrow of burying an adored child never again want to hear the word "undertaker." They find relief in always saying mortician. Now I wonder what new word they will use when everyone is dis-

tressed on hearing the word mortician?

I sympathize deeply with all unhappy people who suffer terribly each day, as they take care of a child whose little brain never developed perfectly, or of a child who has seizures, or, as some may prefer to say, "dysrhythmia in his electroencephalogram," or a mythical low blood sugar. Actually, in this column I am concerned not only with lessening the mental suffering of an occasional individual; I am greatly concerned with doing something to lessen the great distress of the few million Americans who suffer from feeble-mindedness, epilepsy, psychosis, or insanity. I have been scolded for using the word insanity, but that is the proper legal term for the disease of a psychotic person who has had to be committed. My feeling is that since we all of us are going to keep hearing the words that displease us, we might as well—all of us—toughen up and get used to them.

Why do I believe in using the proper words for a disease, and not some substitute, and why do I want people to get over being so angry and hurt when they hear the word they have come to hate? Because I lived through some of the many years in which we doctors could do almost nothing to reduce the high incidence of "consumption" (tuberculosis) because people did not want to hear that then-very-common disease mentioned. Also, I want people to get used to unpleasant words because I lived through the years when no Army medical officer could beg the public to help him to reduce the distressingly high incidence of incapacitating venereal disease in the Armed Forces. In that day no editor in the land was permitted to mention the word syphilis in his newspaper. As a result, no health officer could protest to the families of soldiers about the encampments full of diseased women which were built up and maintained right outside the gate of an Army post.

Only when a dread disease is dragged out into the light of day, only when one people can be made to see the great seriousness of a problem like that of polio or tuberculosis; only when we stop "sweeping the problem under the rug," and only when our fine, big-hearted people come to see how they can do their bit to wipe the disease off the face of the earth, do they come to us doctors with understanding, help, money, and perhaps a willingness to put some needed pressure on the legislators to institute reforms.

So please, good people, forgive me if, at times, I hurt you. Only as all of us come to face facts bravely, will we be able to wipe out the diseases that still curse our humanity. As long as we hide the truth, our children will have to go on suffering.

Dr. Alvarez' booklet on heart trouble may be obtained by sending 25 cents and a large, stamped, self-addressed envelope with your request to Dr. Walter C. Alvarez, Dept. MMT, The Register and Tribune Syndicate, Box 937, Des Moines 4, Iowa.

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