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To: Ellen Bassuk
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Dear Dr. Bassuk:

Attached please find the most favorable review of your volume THE DOCTOR ACTIVIST that appeared in The New England Journal of Medicine, Volume 335, Number 14 (October 3, 1996). We are pleased to see the book receive such positive publicity and expect that it will continue.

Sincerely,

Kathleen Lucadamo
Assistant Editor
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BOOK REVIEWS

...interest in neuroscience or medical history who venture into its pages will not be able to put it down.

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THE DOCTOR-ACTIVIST: PHYSICIANS FIGHTING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Edited by Ellen L. Bassuk, with the assistance of Rebecca W. Carman. 254 pp. New York, Plenum, 1996. \$27.95. ISBN 0-306-45267-7.

THERE is a long and venerable history of physicians serving as political activists. Rudolf Virchow pioneered the "irritation" theory of cancer and the principles of cellular pathology in the middle of the past century, but he was also the leader of a campaign for compulsory meat inspection in Berlin and the architect of the city's sewage system. Activist medicine continues today in more organized forms, in groups like Physicians for Social Responsibility, Physicians for Human Rights, and International Physicians for the Prevention of Nuclear War.

This collection brings together 10 brief autobiographies of American doctors fighting for social change. The experiences are diverse. Louis Fazen practiced pediatrics with Cherokee and Shawnee in Oklahoma; Edith and Thomas Welty faced the desperate poverty of Haiti and the difficulty of dealing with Navajo "skinwalkers." John E. Mack tells how he became involved in the antinuclear movement, and Donald P. Francis charts how his early family experiences led him to challenge the mishandling of the AIDS crisis by the Centers for Disease Control (Randy Shilts's *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic* [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1987] expands on Francis's role in these events). All the accounts are personal and remarkably free of pretense; the editor's expressed hope is that knowing something about the lives of successful activists may help galvanize others to take similar paths.

Judith Longstaff MacKay's contribution is one of the more captivating. MacKay has worked for years to combat smoking in China, Mongolia, and other parts of Asia; she helped launch Hong Kong's aggressive antismoking program of 1987 — including a ban on the importation or sale of smokeless tobacco — despite pressures from U.S. Senator Robert Dole and others who threatened to retaliate with trade restrictions. MacKay notes with deserved satisfaction that Hong Kong today vies with Singapore for having the lowest prevalence of smoking in the world, though she also warns that in Asia as a whole the habit continues to spread — and rapidly.

H. Jack Geiger came to medical activism through journalism and the civil-rights movement, campaigning in Wisconsin in the 1940s against racial discrimination in housing and later, in South Africa, for improved medical care in the impoverished black townships. In the early 1960s, Geiger helped found the Medical Committee for Human Rights, Physicians for Social Responsibility, and a widely imitated community health center at Columbia

Point in the Mississippi delta. Civil rights and opposition to the Vietnam war were defining movements in Geiger's activism, as they were for several other contributors to the book.

The foreword by Julius B. Richmond of Harvard's Department of Social Medicine suggests that we know very little about what leads one physician rather than another into social activism, and suggests — and I would second the motion — that research be done in this area. He also cautions that the corporatization of medicine may make activism more difficult. Social responsibility has never been a part of the Hippocratic oath, but the men and women writing in this book give us hope that there will always be doctors willing to fight for social and environmental justice. One is also led to suspect, though, that we will never have too many.

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ON THE LEDGE: A DOCTOR'S STORIES FROM THE INNER CITY

By Neil S. Skolnik. 157 pp. Winchester, Mass., Faber & Faber, 1996. \$19.95. ISBN 0-571-19883-X.

THIS book chronicles the experiences of a young family doctor practicing in an inner-city clinic in Philadelphia, where, apparently, he is surprised to find complex and seemingly intractable social problems among a patient population mired in severe urban poverty. The chapters are, in essence, experiential essays describing the realities of providing health care in such a setting.

For physicians who have trained or practiced in economically depressed communities, this book offers little in the way of new insight into the lives of poor, generally disenfranchised people grappling with every manner of adversity. On the other hand, the reader learns a great deal about Dr. Skolnik, who tends to react to the realities of his practice with his own somewhat awkwardly expressed feelings of helplessness, frustration, and anger.

By page 3, the author describes himself as "powerless" and muses that, at the end of his two-year odyssey, he has "given fewer immunizations than I should have." (The reader wonders why this was so; the book offers little explanation.) Although he does refer a patient to a domestic-violence program and another to drug rehab, most of the stories end without much satisfaction or resolution. Only passing reference is made to the many other experiences that, one assumes, were more rewarding for patient or physician.

This was not an easy read, perhaps because too many of Dr. Skolnik's own misgivings and frustrations were shared in a string of rather clichéd and self-absorbed musings. Although this is a short book, I counted no less than 21 references to his "looking" or "staring" out the window while pondering his own fate, the condition of the surrounding neighborhood, or the hopeless lives of his patients.

In one telling — and particularly distressing — chapter,