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History Note

Taking babies from their moms seemed best for family

by Luther Granquist

In the 1940s, Dr. C. Anderson Aldrich, a highly respected pediatrician at the Mayo Clinic, advised that mothers should be separated from a child with Down syndrome (Mongolism was the term used then) immediately after birth. From 1942 to 1944, 67 babies in Minnesota were placed under state guardianship allowing for placement in a boarding home and, ultimately, a state hospital. In 1946, Dr. Benjamin Spock made a similar recommendation in the first edition of *Baby and Child Care*. Both Aldrich and Spock contended that the family would be far better off without a child with a disability and that the child with Down syndrome would fare far better in an institution.

In a speech given in St. Paul in 1947 on "Preventive Medicine and Mongolism," Aldrich advised physicians to lie to the mother — to tell her that the baby was not strong enough to be brought to her and must stay in the nursery for a few days. Then the physician should meet with the father, relatives, and, if possible, a clergyman to develop a plan for placement that would be presented to the mother as a fait accompli. This plan, he said, had failed him only a few times in fifteen years. Two years later Robert Rosenthal, a pediatrics professor at the University of Minnesota reiterated Aldrich's proposal at an Institute on Mental Deficiency.

But times were beginning to change. Another university professor, Dr. Reynold Jensen, advised at that same conference that ample time be provided parents of a newborn with an evident disability to consider what they ought to do. In 1956 he arranged a conference for physicians from Minnesota and surrounding states to advise them about how to deal with the parents. None of the presenters, leading physicians from around the country, mentioned Aldrich's proposal. None of them suggested anything like it. Spock also tempered his advice in the 1957 edition of his famous book.

In 1964, the Section on Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics of the American Academy of Pediatrics honored Aldrich, who died in 1949, by establishing the C. Anderson Aldrich Award for pediatricians in recognition of the influence and guidance he had provided on many other child care issues. Gunnar Dybwad, one of the early leaders of the Association for Retarded Children, received that award in 1973. Always the consummate gentleman, Dybwad made no mention of Aldrich's preventive medicine recommendations in the lecture he gave at that time. He did not hesitate, however, to chastise those doctors who still continued to advise that babies with Down syndrome be separated from their mothers and placed in foster care or institutions.

The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities, www.mnddc.org or www.mncdd.org and www.partnersinpolicymaking.com ■

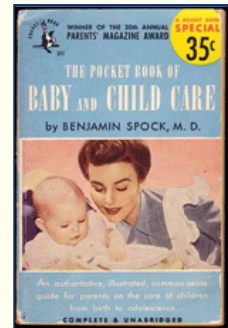


Photo from Front Page



Dr. C. Anderson Aldrich

Access Press
(651) 644 - 2133
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Tim Benjamin
Publisher &
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