

## **Dr. Jack Elinson: Pioneer in the Sociomedical Sciences**

**Dr. Jack Elinson:** Sociomedical sciences are those social sciences which help us to understand the health of the population and the healthcare that the population receives. They include: anthropology, particularly social anthropology; political science; history; economics; psychology, particularly social psychology; and sociology.

**Alexi Komisar:** Assessing the public's health was once largely a matter of counting the dead and infirmed. The health implications of being able to perform daily activities, involvement in social relationships, and participation in social activities were unresearched and uncounted. Today, these factors are key to understanding the public's health. This was once a revolutionary idea championed by pioneers who would inevitably create a new field of health science, the sociomedical sciences. One of these pioneers is Dr. Jack Elinson.

**David Rosner:** In the field of public health itself, in the '30s, but also in the '20s and the teens, there had been a long struggle that had really in some sense framed a lot of what Jack would be thinking about, a struggle between those who saw public health as primarily a sanitary science, a science of cleaning up the city and cleaning up environments; those who saw public health as a bacteriological science, a science of lab technicians who would find

bacteria and wipe them out; and those who saw public health as really a field in which the entire social environment of all human beings had to be taken into account, that the world in which people lived and the societies in which people lived really directly affected their health. Jack would enter into the field of public health in the very time that the society seemed obviously to be in chaos. It was during the Depression and World War II that he really came to create ideas and ideas that would be reflected in his later work, in his attempt to in some sense merge society and medicine in this concept of social medicine.

**Alexi Komisar:** Having graduated from City College of New York in 1937 at the age of 19, Dr. Elinson received an offer to work in Washington D.C. as a minor laboratory apprentice in the Food and Drug Administration. Prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor, Dr. Elinson transferred to the United States Army's Morale and Attitudes Research branch, where he would begin his career in health research.

**Dr. Jack Elinson:** The senior social scientists, which included people like \*Sam \*Stouffer, \*Leonard \*Cottro, \*Carl \*Hovlen, \*Quinn \*MacNamar, \*Louie \*Guttman, they did studies of interest to social scientists, which were race relations, morale, why we fight, attitudes towards discipline. When we were asked to do health studies, they delegated to the most junior social scientist, which was me, and I was assigned the health studies to do. That gave me my start in doing health studies.

**Alexi Komisar:** Dr. Elinson's research aided in the understanding of soldiers' morale and anxiety and was used in the preparation for major military campaigns. With the end of World War II, Dr. Elinson was recruited by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago. There, Dr. Elinson collaborated with Dr. Ray Trussell, Director of the Hunterdon Medical Center, in a groundbreaking study for the National Commission on Chronic Illness, the first study to include clinical examination along with questionnaires in a probability sample of the general population.

**Dr. Jack Elinson:** In the Hunterdon Study, the most surprising result was that four times as many chronic disabling conditions were found by clinical examination as could be reported in a personal interview.

**Alexi Komisar:** When Dr. Trussell became Dean of the School of Public Health at Columbia University, he invited Dr. Elinson to join the faculty. It was here that Dr. Elinson would set about changing the role of social scientists in public health.

**Allan Rosenfield:** A social scientist wouldn't even apply. There was no role for them here, and there were no faculty mentors for them before Jack was here.

**Eugene Litwak:** And health is not a respecter of discipline. By that, I mean anthropology, sociology, psychology, economics, political science, history all can affect health. And if your focus is on health, you have to take all of those things into account. Jack, in his development of sociomedical sciences, has struck a compromise, a unique compromise, in which the graduate student has a fundamental in one discipline and then is given a generalized education in the others.

**Allan Rosenfield:** The number of social scientists working in this School of Public Health and all Schools of Public Health are many, as social sciences have invaded all aspects of public health, from health promotion, disease prevention, through epidemiologic research to cancer to a whole range of issues. Jack Elinson is the father of this, in our opinion. He's been a wonderful mentor to so many people. And even though Jack stepped down as chair now probably 15 or 20 years ago, he has remained involved with the department, an inspiration to students and faculty alike. And he's a tradition and an icon at our school.

**Alexi Komisar:** Throughout his more than 40 years with the Division of Sociomedical Sciences, Dr. Elinson has had both a personal and professional impact on many of his students.

**Donald Sadowsky:** Jack has been a mentor, a counselor, a confidante, a confessor, a friend, and has been very important in my life.

**Mary E. Northridge:** Jack took a special interest, as he does not only with me but with other students. And through the years, whenever anything important or special has happened, either in the projects that I've been doing or, you know, new directions I might be taking, it seems that Jack is always there at the crossroads cheering me on.

**Donald Sadowsky::** Jack has, in his own inimitable way, has a way of listening to you very, very carefully and very attentively and with great respect.

**Unidentified Speaker:** I've had many conversations with students of Jack who have said the same thing, "You know, at the time he said it, it really didn't sink in. But after I left the office, I began to think about what Dr. Elinson said."

**Unidentified Speaker:** And you realize that he's given you the key to the solution of the problem that you're working on. And I don't know; it's a kind of alchemy and intellectual magic. I don't know how he does that.

**Donald H Gemson:** And that really, I think, marks an excellent professor, someone who not only can communicate, someone who's not only knowledgeable, but someone who can make his students think.

**Mary E. Northridge:** He believes in change. And a lot of times, when you institute change, you get some backlash because there are people that are accustomed to the way things are. So whether it was including new voices in the journal or a new look for the journal, the first person to come to me and compliment me and support me on the changes was Jack.

**Alexi Komisar:** While leading and teaching in the Division of Sociomedical Sciences, Dr. Elinson also forged ahead in his research pursuits. One important project involved developing a sampling frame within the Harlem community, initiating the first Harlem Adult Health Survey. This work provided the foundation for other Columbia researchers for years to come.

**Ann Brunswick:** We were able to use his well-developed sampling frame, which included every housing unit in Central Harlem. We took adolescents ages 12 through 17 from those housing units in 1967, a time when African-American adolescents were an unknown factor in terms of their health.

**Alexi Komisar:** The Harlem Adolescent Study would become a Longitudinal Cohort Study that would collect data for over 30 years. This study was recently recognized by Radcliffe College as a landmark study of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Ann Brunswick:** Making it a Longitudinal Study actually was an idea that first arose from a conversation with Jack Elinson. So I must say I attribute a lot of my gratification which this study has brought me to Jack.

**Alexi Komisar:** Another field in which Dr. Elinson had a profound effect was in health-related quality of life indicators. One of his many contributions to this field was to change the health-related quality of life evaluation paradigm by coining the expression “The Five Ds.”

**Dr. Jack Elinson:** There was a conference call by the National Center for Health Services Research, \*Paul \*Zanazarro being its first director. It was a conference in which medical faculty who were interested in health services research were going to learn about it. I was a member of the teaching faculty. I went through the usual designs of how you do studies and so on, regular evaluation studies when an internist popped up from the audience and asked, “But what will you measure in these studies?” So I wrote down on the board, “Death, disease, disability, discomfort, and dissatisfaction.”

**Donald H Gemson:** I believe that he is a genuine pioneer in the field of public health. For one thing, he was talking about quality of life before most of us ever heard the term and about the importance of measuring and assessing quality of life.

**Alexi Komisar:** When Secretary of Health Guillermo Arbona asked the Columbia School of Public Health to conduct a study of medical and hospital care in Puerto Rico, this began a long relationship between Dr. Elinson and the people of Puerto Rico. Throughout his career, Jack has had the love and support of May, his wife of 60 years, his children, and grandchildren. As it has become clear that the health of the public is linked to larger social issues such as socioeconomic status and racial disparities, the sociomedical sciences are becoming an increasingly interesting field of study.

**David Rosner:** And what's interesting about sociomedical sciences, and what's interesting about the ideas that Jack really embodied is that he from the very first was refuting the simple-minded, or I should say, the simplistic or even the reductionist idea about what disease is.

**Mary E. Northridge:** I think the time has come again where there is going to be more of an emphasis, as I see it, on the social sciences to really move public health forward.

**David Rosner:** It's just a lot more fruitful, a lot more interesting, a lot more intellectually stimulating than understanding the world as just a mechanical problem of a few germs, you know, or genes that are determining all of our lives.

**Alexi Komisar:** Why someone would want to pursue a career in public health, specifically sociomedical sciences, is best summarized by Dr. Elinson.

**Dr. Jack Elinson:** Social determinants such as socioeconomic status, the neighborhoods you live in, the kind of family relations you have, the social networks which you exist in, advertising contributes to people's health or ill health. And if you want to look into these questions, the way to study that is to use the sociomedical sciences, which includes all the social sciences bearing on health questions.