

Part 23:
'Medical McCarthyism'

The New York Times reported that in June 2001 state medical boards were investigating doctors who treated with antibiotics for longer than Dr. Allen Steere's ruling Lyme treatment guideline of 2 to 4 weeks. (June 17, 2001)

"In the most recent and explosive case," the Times article stated, "they have taken on the man who had predicted he would be targeted nearly a decade ago for speaking out in the Senate and who Steere once called 'the principal force leading to the overdiagnosis and overtreatment of this illness.'" That doctor was Joseph Burrascano.

Newsweek followed the opening of Burrascano's hearing months earlier. "A few days before Halloween," journalist David France wrote in an autumn 2000 Newsweek article, "a popular Long Island, N.Y., Lyme-disease specialist named Joseph Burrascano entered a state Health Department hearing room where one of medicine's rancorous academic disputes will be played out: how much antibiotics is too much when treating Lyme?" (Nov. 6, 2000)

"This is no mere intellectual inquiry," France explained. "Burrascano is standing trial before the Office of Professional Medical Conduct on negligence charges for medicating some patients for several years on end. By next February he could be censured or even stripped of his medical license as a result."

Dr. Burrascano, who reported treating some 7,000 individuals from 42 states and 11 countries in the course of 15 years of his medical work, is also "a published Lyme expert who has testified before Congress," the Newsweek article stated.

The article continued, "In their complaint, state investigators charged him with mistreating nine patients. But those patients side with their doctor."

The New York Times elaborated: "The charges are said to have been based on files of nine patients, and include accusations Dr. Burrascano failed to diagnose or treat them properly or to follow up adequately on their conditions." (Nov. 10, 2000)

The Times reported that five of those patients attended a November 9, 2000 rally in Manhattan in support of Dr. Burrascano, "denying the accusations and expressing indignation that their files had been used without their knowledge. All said Dr. Burrascano had brought them back to health or had improved their conditions after long periods of suffering." (Nov. 10, 2000)

One of Burrascano's patients, 77-year-old Ruth A. Giglio, told the New York Times: "To have taken my files and put together any case against Dr. Burrascano is a kind of medical

McCarthyism."

Giglio concluded, "This is tantamount to a witch hunt as far as I'm concerned."

In the Newsweek article headlined "A War Over Lyme Disease," journalist David France noted, "Other medical fields are marked by roiling disputes, like whether too many children are drugged for attention-deficit disorders. But as Robert Cassidy, director of biomedical ethics at Long Island Jewish Hospital in New York, puts it: 'This is usually the sort of thing that is fought out at professional meetings, not by tearing off epaulettes in the parade ground.'" (Nov. 6, 2000)

Dr. Burrascano told interviewer for the New York Times David Grann that after months of investigation, "I've been preparing for days with little sleep. I've totally used up any money I might have had."

Grann continued, "[H]e told me that what Steere and the medical boards were doing was a form of medical McCarthyism. They were trying to resolve a medical dispute that had raged for years by simply annihilating doctors on the other side."

But to Grann's surprise, "Burrascano, in contrast to the doctors in medical lore who were devastated by feuds with the medical establishment, seemed unafraid. Rather than isolated, he was being swept up in the arms of a new force."

Burrascano stated, "There's a whole political movement going on now."

Next: 'We'll defend our doctors!'