

## **Editorial: Remembering heretical heroes: Norman E. Zinberg and Edward M. Brecher**

BY CRAIG REINARMAN

The world of drug and alcohol scholarship suffered tragic losses during April 1989. Dr. Norman E. Zinberg, professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, died suddenly of a heart attack on April 2. Two weeks later Edward M. Brecher, long-time medical journalist and author of a classic book on drugs, took his own life after a long battle with cancer. Both these beloved men enriched and enlivened our field.

Dr. Zinberg authored over 150 journal articles and book chapters as well as several important books, including *Drug, Set, and Setting: The Basis of Controlled Intoxicant Use* and *Drugs and the Public*. His writings constitute not only an outstanding record of research, but also a strong, challenging voice for more complex and humane understanding of drug and alcohol problems. With his student Andrew Weil, he conducted pathbreaking research in the 1960s on the effects of marijuana on humans. When first proposed, these controlled experiments met with a wall of resistance. Most of the dominant people in the field felt sure they already "knew"

the evils of marijuana, but it turned out that the most basic research had not yet been done. Zinberg and Weil's findings, published in prestigious journals such as *Science* and *Nature*, struck a serious blow against simplistic pharmacological determinism. They demonstrated that users' personalities and expectations ("set"), as well as the situational and cultural context of use ("setting"), shaped both the felt effects and the consequences of drug use.

Zinberg went on to explore these insights for other drugs, including heroin. He proposed that we might learn a great deal from studying people who used heroin in a controlled fashion. He was told by most experts and funding authorities that this was a bad idea, that such controlled heroin users simply did not exist. He eventually convinced enough people that he was able to get the funding, do the research, and show that indeed such people did exist, in large numbers. More important, he demonstrated that users and their cultural practices afforded largely unexamined opportunities for control over even the most addictive of substances. This work generated important clues about the social-psychological foundations of addiction that have helped many people avoid drugs or get out of trouble with drugs. Norman's work suggests that it is entirely likely that more drug problems are prevented or reduced by "informal social controls" than by harsh laws and formal treatment regimens. While such ideas cut against the dominant ideological grain of the field, they have withstood the tests of time, and many of us continue to study their ramifications and to build upon his work.

In reading his more recent books and articles on the treatment of alcohol problems, one is struck by Norman Zinberg's ability to articulate a rare vision of policy that is as free of moralism and orthodoxy as it is full of historical insight and humanitarian concern. He served ably as a consultant to many government bodies, testified before Congress on drug bills, and trained generations of psychiatrists. He was a member of the editorial boards of several

journals, including this one, and served numerous treatment organizations in an advisory capacity. He gave unstintingly of his time and energy—not only to the students and patients who were his formal charges, but also to countless others. Those of us who were privileged to know Norman personally learned that his critical intellect was always clothed in kindness, generosity, and wit.

Edward M. Brecher is most well known in the drug and alcohol field as the principal author of *Licit and Illicit Drugs*, the delightfully written, encyclopedic history prepared for the Consumers Union and first published in 1972, just after the 1960s-era drug scare had poisoned the climate for rational discourse on drug policy. In it, Brecher and his colleagues were bold enough to report their exhaustively researched history of drug use and drug problems, which exposed a cornucopia of contradictions in drug control policy.

He took on alcohol, nicotine, caffeine, and pharmaceutical products in his analyses—not just scapegoated illicit drugs, as was all the rage at the time. He audaciously presented the long view of drug use. More than any other single author, Brecher taught Americans about the many centuries and the many ways humans have strived for consciousness alteration, and just how ineffective repressive policies have been historically. In fact, he documented more than a few cases in which anti-drug hysteria had actually fomented drug abuse. While making clear all the risks and problems, Brecher and his colleagues wrote about drugs in a way that consumers of these substances could recognize and appreciate. Though published nearly 20 years ago, *Licit and Illicit Drugs* continues to be used in dozens of university courses.

Edward Brecher was a journalist and writer who covered more than just the drug field. He conducted research for the U.S. Senate Committee on Interstate Commerce and for the Federal Communications Commission. He served as an

associate editor of *Consumer Reports* and as an editor for the United Nations Technical Assistance Administration. In addition to the countless newspaper and magazine articles he wrote in his 35 years as a free-lancer, with his late wife Ruth he authored *An Analysis of Human Sexual Response*, a New American Library version of the Masters and Johnson classic geared to popular audiences. More recently, Brecher wrote *The Sex Researchers* and *Love, Sex and Aging*. He and his wife received the Albert Lasker Award for medical journalism and the Robert T. Morse Writer's Award from the American Psychiatric Association, which, according to *The New York Times*, cited them as "scholarly crusaders for a better life for all Americans."

Last November I was fortunate enough to be at the Drug Policy Foundation's International Conference on Drug Policy Reform when Ed Brecher was awarded the Alfred Lindesmith Award for lifetime contributions to scholarship in the drug field. Ironically, he was introduced by Norman Zinberg. In his warmly funny overview of Ed's work, Norman told us drug researchers that Ed was also a hero in the sex field, and that his work on sex among the elderly was particularly important. Norman predicted that as we grew to be as old as he was, we would come to value Brecher even more for that than we did for his research on drugs.

When Norman finished his introduction of Ed, there was a thunderous ovation from the 200 scholars representing a dozen nations. Over the standing crowd one could barely see this bespectacled little man with his Einstein-like shock of white hair. At first Ed was too moved, and perhaps too modest, to speak. After Arnold Trebach and Norman prevailed upon him, he began his acceptance speech by saying, "If you choose drugs and sex as your areas of study, the damnedest things are tax deductible."

My remembering the fine sense of humor of these men is perhaps a way of trying to forget that they are gone. But then, their ideas—and the ways they touched and taught us—mean that Zinberg and Brecher will never be altogether gone. For however bad we imagine our drug and alcohol problems to be, they would be worse—and our collective understanding of them far poorer—had it not been for the work and wisdom of Norman Zinberg and Edward Brecher. Their deaths should prod us to appreciate our heroes while they are still with us. I hope, too, that our loss will inspire us to follow their example in the difficult work left to do. Their footsteps are huge.