

Remembering Jack B. Karlin, D.O.

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I've written before about how medical professionals who treated trans patients in the 1970s were "sitting ducks" for chastisement by the authorities. One of these folks was Jack B. Karlin, D.O. Karlin was a Philadelphia native who graduated in 1957 from Temple University as a Biology major. While at Temple, he was also president of Alpha Sigma Pi. He went on to medical school at the Philadelphia College of Osteopathy graduating in the class of 1961.

He was a neighborhood family practice doctor in South Philadelphia who also offered hormonal care to trans people. Karlin began practicing in South Philadelphia in 1961. Aside from having regular office hours, he regularly made house calls, charging \$20-\$25 per visit. (Philadelphia Inquirer, 5/1/1981, p. 20) Karlin began treating trans patients when a neighborhood transperson, reputedly Rachel Harlow, asked him for hormones. He began treating this patient and within no time, word had spread. He was also listed by the Erickson Educational Foundation (EEF) as a hormone provider.¹



From the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine Yearbook, 1961

That's how I came across him when I was looking for a hormone provider while I was in my senior year at Penn State University in fall, 1972. I wrote to the EEF asking for information on Pennsylvania HRT providers and they sent me the names of three doctors. One was in Philadelphia and two were in Pittsburgh. To see any of these doctors, I would have to do a bit of traveling: Pittsburgh was about 130 miles away, and Philly was about 200 miles away. Despite the longer distance I chose the provider in Philly since he was closer to my hometown. The provider was Jack Karlin.

My first visit with Karlin in October 1972 was so momentous that I recorded it in my diary:

I finally reached the doctor's office after some searching among the unfamiliar streets of Philadelphia. It was a rather large, squat building among block after block of row homes. It provided some comfort for by now, I was practically one giant nerve. I kept wondering how understanding the doctor would be, whether or not he would be willing to give me the hormone treatments I so badly wanted. Or would he regard me as some mixed-up post-adolescent and refuse my case. Through reliable sources, I had found that he was sympathetic to transsexuals, but there is always that element of the unknown or the uncertain, which can work on one's mind, until the person is virtually in a state of terror. Well, I had come this far, and there really was nothing to lose, so finally, in this resigned state of mind, I entered his office.

The walk across the waiting room was about a mile long, or so it seemed. The nurse who greeted me was young and very pretty. She asked me my name and age, and I returned to the waiting room for that long, painful wait.

Finally, the doctor appeared, called my name, and ushered me into this examination room. He told me to sit on the exam table, and asked what my problem was.

Having rehearsed the lines previously, I replied that I was referred to him because he might give me estrogen treatments. He nodded and began to ask me about my motives. I explained that my masculine body was in disharmony with my feminine mind, and through hormones, I hoped to reach a balance between the two. I also told him that the decision to undergo hormone treatments was not a hasty one and only followed many months of introspection.

The doctor listened attentively, nodding occasionally, obviously appreciating our “psychiatric” exchange. I explained that I had read Harry Benjamin’s book and everything else I could get my hands on concerning transsexualism. Perhaps the clincher was when I told the doctor that I had traveled 180 miles to consult with him. He was obviously impressed.

Without saying another word, the doctor began to examine me, first asking me to remove my shirt. I weighed 161 lbs., and my blood pressure was normal. Surprisingly, he produced a tape measure and measured my chest (38 inches) and hips (36 inches). I suppose as time goes by, he will be able to keep tabs on my development. After all of this was completed, he prepared a syringe by filling it with two different drugs. I dropped my drawers, and he administered the injection. I was so keyed up, I never even felt it. Then he wrote out a prescription for diethylstilbestrol, taken once a day, and Enovid, 20 mg. a day.

While he was writing all this up, I relaxed by chatting with him. I asked him how many transsexuals he was currently treating. I almost fell off the exam table when he replied, “Oh right now, about 150 or so.” 150 transsexuals! Since then, I have never felt alone in my problem. The doctor explained that he had begun by treating one person, being much opposed by the local medical profession. After that, word spread, until now, the doctor is running a virtual clinic for transsexuals.

Clutching the prescription as a trophy, I left the office in a virtual state of euphoria. The whole visit took about half an hour, but it felt like five minutes.

I would make the Philly trip every two to three weeks for injections. Dr. Karlin didn’t take appointments. You went in, gave your name to the receptionist/nurse, who in some cases was his attractive wife, Elaine. Then you waited your turn. People were seen in the order in which they appeared. It wasn’t unusual to see several trans folks in the waiting room.

After graduating from college about six months after my first hormone shot, I moved to Philly. Over the next decade, I continued to see him every two to three weeks. He not only was my hormone

provider; he treated me for cuts, burns, the flu, and almost anything else that came along. I remember calling him frantically from work, telling him I was really getting sick, but I wouldn't be able to get to his office until about twenty minutes after his office closing time. He told me to calm down and come and knock loudly at the door when I arrived: he would stay there until I could be seen. How often has that happened to you? He was indeed a compassionate, competent, skilled practitioner. However, both the medical establishment and his own misdeeds started to land him in considerable trouble.



Karlin's office at 2500 S. Sheridan Street in Philadelphia

In 1976, Karlin was arrested on two misdemeanor charges of illegally prescribing Dilaudid. While he was being booked and fingerprinted, an officer working at the police station had a cardiac arrest. Karlin performed CPR on the stricken police officer for half an hour. While Karlin was able to get his heart beating, ultimately, despite his best efforts, the officer died. Nevertheless, because of his efforts, the District Attorney recommended that the judge accept Karlin's plea of no contest in return for two years' probation and a deferred verdict.²

In 1979, Karlin was suspended for two years from participation in the medical assistance program (Medicaid) because he allegedly "prescribed or administered drugs that his records did not show to be medically necessary and failed to keep adequate records." Karlin appealed, responding that his treatment of transsexuals was the motivation for this suspension.³

But it wouldn't be medical misdeeds that landed Karlin in trouble. It would be his financial dealings regarding Federal and State income taxes that finally got him in serious trouble. On November 8, 1984, Karlin, then 50 years old, was arrested on tax evasion charges. The IRS maintained that Karlin was part of a tax-protest movement, and he hadn't filed a proper tax return since 1976. From 1977 to 1982, he filed blank returns. According to news reports, "In 1977 ... Karlin's return did not list any income information. Instead, he pleaded the Fifth Amendment, saying that revealing his income would incriminate him. ... In 1978 ... Karlin's income tax return included a vow of poverty and ...

Karlin was an ordained minister in the Life Science Church.” Karlin admitted that his involvement in the Church was a “misadventure.” Karlin countersued the government, declaring himself a “sovereign American freeman.” His defense did not satisfy the court and Karlin was sentenced to a \$60,000 fine, and five years’ probation.⁴

Once the federal authorities were done with Karlin, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania took its turn. The Commonwealth maintained that Karlin had net profits of \$45,303 in 1985 and \$53,793 in 1986. In this case, the penalty was more severe. He was sentenced to pay a \$10,000 fine and two to four years in prison.⁵

But Karlin’s troubles were not confined to tax evasion. In 1990 the Pennsylvania Board of Osteopathic Medicine considered disciplinary or corrective actions against Karlin but there is no record that the board acted upon it at the time. However, in 2004, Karlin was accused of writing thousands of illegal prescriptions between 2000 and 2002, as well as submitting fraudulent bills to an insurance firm. Karlin was also charged with witness tampering. This would be his ultimate undoing, but regardless of this, his time was running short.⁶



Karlin later in life, from Ancestry.

On March 17, 2006, Karlin’s license was suspended by the Pennsylvania Board of Osteopathic Medicine “based on findings that he violated the Controlled Substance, Drug, Device and Cosmetic Act by pleading guilty to illegally dispensing and distributing controlled substances.” Karlin died 13 days later on March 30, 2006, at the age of 72.⁷ Contributions were to be made to the National Parkinson’s Disease Foundation, probably indicating that Karlin was suffering from Parkinson’s disease in his last days. His wife Elaine died in 2016 at the age of 81.⁸ He was the father of two daughters and a son. His son Brian followed along in Jack’s footsteps and became a doctor of osteopathy as well. He joined his father’s practice in 1986, but Brian died tragically at the age 43 in Las Vegas in 1998.

Jack Karlin may have been a bit of a rouge and an outlaw. But he also gave good medical care to thousands of residents in South Philadelphia, including hundreds of trans folks. Did his care of trans folks contribute to his downfall? I would argue that it may not have, but it certainly did not help his case. Rest in Peace, Doctor Karlin, and thanks.

Endnotes

¹ Philadelphia Inquirer, 5/1/1981, p. 20

² Gloucester County Times, 7/25/1976, p. 22

³ Philadelphia Inquirer, 12/28/1979, p. 6; Philadelphia Inquirer, 1/18/1980, p. 12

⁴ Philadelphia Inquirer, 11/9/1984, p. 1; Philadelphia Inquirer, 5/29/1985, p. 16

⁵ Philadelphia Inquirer, 5/14/1989, p. 18

⁶ Camden Courier-Post, Friday April 9, 2004, p. 15

⁷ PA Dept. of State, State Health Licensing Boards Disciplinary Actions, 2nd Quarter 2006, p. 9

⁸ Philadelphia Inquirer, 4/4/2006, p. B06