

Upon his retirement from clinical practice

A tribute to Dr. Herbert Rakatansky

The following remarks were delivered by Newell Warde, Executive Director of RIMS, on the occasion of Dr. Rakatansky's retirement from medical practice on May 30, 2008.

I am grateful for this opportunity to say a big, public "thank you" to Dr. Herbert Rakatansky on behalf of the Rhode Island Medical Society.

Dr. Rak is a pillar of the Medical Society, and he has been for more than 30 years. His career is an affirmation of all the reasons why doctors come together in professional organizations.

He was President of our Society in 1985–86, which was a turbulent time of massive liability crisis.

Later we made him a Delegate to the AMA, where he served for seven years. That brought him together with hundreds of other physician leaders from all over the country, and as a result, in 1994, the President of the AMA personally appointed Dr. Rakatansky to the AMA's most prestigious body, the Council on Ethical and Judicial Affairs (CEJA). Also known as the "Supreme Court of Medicine," CEJA is the profession's ultimate authority on matters of medical ethics. Dr. Rak served on CEJA for seven years, the last two years as Chair.

So that's a pretty impressive record of leadership and service to the profession. But obviously I haven't even mentioned what everybody knows about Dr. Rak, which is that for 30 years – so far! – he has led the Physician Health Program of the Rhode Island Medical Society.

Not only led it. It is no exaggeration to say that he invented it. And he has continually reinvented it over the past 30 years. It is an incredible achievement, and an incredible legacy of leadership, of crystal clear vision, and of deep devotion to the profession and to colleagues. It is also an incredible gift to the medical community (and by the way also to the dental community, the podiatric community and the physician assistant community, because

all of those professional groups are full participants in our program). And it's an incredible gift to the people of Rhode Island.

You could say that it all started 30 years ago this very month. In 1978, two prominent and beloved doctors in this community died by their own hands. The first of those two shocks came in the early May of 1978. Dr. Rak did not know this gentleman, but he reacted immediately. Already in the June 1978 issue of the *Rhode Island Medical Journal* there appeared a letter-to-the-editor reflecting on this recent tragedy. And if ever there was a seminal letter, this was one, signed by this young Herbert Rakatansky, MD, and published there, in our journal under the apt heading "Vulnerability of Physicians."

In that letter, Dr. Rak issued a challenge, that the Rhode Island Medical Society should create a program of some kind to address these special needs of physicians.

The response from the Medical Society at that time was predictable. They said "Herb, that's a great idea. Why don't you do it?"

Today our Physician Health Program is a gem. It does delicate, difficult and voluminous work, and it does it very well. I am convinced there are few places in the country where these things function quite as well as they do here in Rhode Island. There are many reasons for that and many people who deserve credit. We have always had a Committee of very dedicated people, – all of them recruited by Dr. Rak, of course. And since 1990 we have had outstanding, professionally qualified staff, hand picked by Dr. Rak. For ten years it was our RN, the late, great Bill Moclair, and for the past eight years we've had our wonderful and tireless MSW, Rosemary Maher. I won't belabor this point because I know others will speak to it, but let me say, from the Medical

Society's perspective, because it is so important, that we value our exceptionally well balanced relationship with the state authorities, and by that I mean the Board of Medical Licensure and Discipline and its outstanding leadership for the past 21 years.

But it is Dr. Rakatansky who has provided the consistent vision, the energy, commitment and leadership, with a capital L, that have made our program successful in protecting patients, saving medical careers, saving reputations, marriages and lives.

And I have to mention that for about 20 years now, Dr. Rak and his colleagues on the Committee and Rosemary have also nurtured and mentored a completely separate and parallel program for medical students at Brown, the Medical Student Health Council. I don't have time to begin to tell you about those students. Suffice it to say they have already made their mark on the world, and they are serving a vital purpose at Brown.

Dr. Rak does all of this as a gift to the profession and the community. He has always been purely a volunteer. And I will share a little secret with you. For the past 30 years Dr. Rak has never asked or allowed the Medical Society to reimburse him a penny for the national and international conferences that he participates in every year.

Maybe that'll change now that he's retired, because the good news today for me, and really for all of us as Rhode Islanders and as doctors – is that Dr. Rak has always promised that when he retires from medical practice he will have even more time to devote to the Physician Health Program and to the Medical Society.

I cannot imagine a finer, more profound and meaningful example of collegiality and professionalism.

And for all that I say: thank you, Dr. Rak. ♦