

"Banned, Jailed, Burned, But Never Silenced"



Reich - Millstadt, Norway 1928

Wilhelm Reich, MD

By Lawrence Segel, MD

Doctor Wilhelm Reich once said: "Virtually all diseases are, in essence, products of some type of mental-physical imbalance in the human organism."

Reich accepted holistic health theory, along with many other more provocative ideas. His ideas made him a wanted man, and not just by the fascists in Nazi Germany or the secret police in Communist Russia. It would take the most unlikely combination of American McCarthyism and pro-Stalinist factions to seal his fate.

Wilhelm Reich was born in 1897 to a well-off Austrian family. They were farmers who owned about 1,000 acres of land in the German Ukraine. Reich entered the Austrian army in World War I, was promoted to lieutenant, and served at the Italian front until the end of the war. Upon his return in 1918, Reich entered the Medical School of the University of Vienna and graduated with his medical degree in 1922. He formally trained in neuropsychiatry and became a member of the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society under Professor Sigmund Freud. It was generally accepted that he was earmarked as Freud's protégé, however, a rift developed between the two men in the late 1920s. Reich joined the Austrian Socialist Democrat Party and began to argue forcefully that many of an individual's problems stem from socio-economic conditions, and not just the instincts, as Freud had concluded.

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Socialist Society for Sex Consultation and Sexological Research

Reich went on to organize the Socialist Society for Sex Consultation and Sexological Research. He gave public lectures on sexual topics and published articles linking contraception and pre-marital sex to the economic and social issues of the day. However, he became dissatisfied with the Social Democrats as the threat of Nazism increased, and switched his allegiance to the Communist Party in 1930.

In the early 1930s, Reich argued for legalized birth control, abortion, contraception for teenagers, sex counseling clinics, liberalization of divorce laws and tolerance of homosexuality. With Stalin's rise to power, however, and the suppression of liberalism, Reich's views quickly put him in disfavour with the authorities. He was soon expelled from the Communist Party. Reich now found himself cast out by the

Psychoanalytic School, the Social Democrats, and the Communist Party. At the same time, Hitler was rising to power. His investigation into the attraction that people had for fascism was formulated in his book, "The Mass Psychology of Fascism." It proved to be badly timed and attracted the Nazi ire. Orders were issued for the Gestapo to shoot him on sight and burn all his books. Under an assumed name, Reich escaped to Denmark, then Sweden and finally Norway. In 1939, with the help of Dr. Theodore Wolfe, he secured a teaching contract from the New School for Social Research in New York City.

Human Armour

Reich's theories were very advanced for his time, as illustrated by his statement: "An individuals' sexual satisfaction is not simply satisfaction of a need like hunger, but their spiritual development, their freshness of life, their capacity for work, and their enthusiasm for struggle is affected as much by sexual satisfaction as their material existence." In short, Reich was led to insights on sexuality and uncovering body repressions, or what he termed human "armour." Mental and physical symptoms were the result of the "emotional plague" or destructive behaviour carried out on the social scene. Reich felt that armoured parents, who were themselves sexually repressed, could not help but raise armoured chil-

THE MEDICINE OF HISTORY

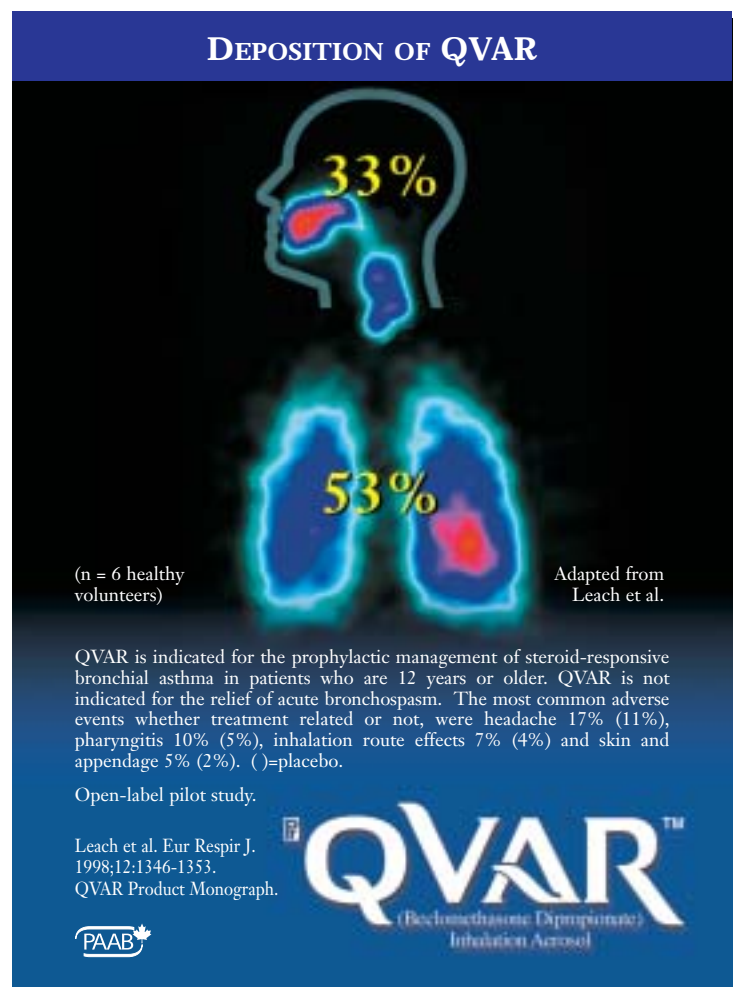
dren. He wanted patients to become aware of how they were suppressing emotions, using non-verbal techniques of bodywork. Physical health was restored through the arousal and release of repressed tension and feeling. He found himself, therefore, a pioneer in holistic health and healing.

Orgone

Reich's most controversial theory was the discovery of "orgone" in 1939. He postulated that he had uncovered the vital energy force that composes all life and permeates the universe. Reich was the first to study the energy scientifically and demonstrate its properties and behaviour. He described it as the same energy that guides the movements of animals and the growth of all living substances. According to Reich, orgone was mass-free, the building block of matter, and the life energy responsible for differentiating the living from the non-living. To some, this discovery hardly seemed original, but a borrowed concept from other cultures such as the Chinese "chi," the Indian yogi's "prana," the Polynesian's "mana," the Sufi's "baraka," or the Plains Indian's "wakan." In the 16th century, Paracelsus called it "munia," in the 18th century Goethe called it "gestaltung" and Mesmer called it "animal magnetism."

Reich, however, pushed further along practical lines. He created blankets and boxes called "orgone accumulators" which would collect this energy, and could subsequently be used for healing disease. In 1941, Reich met with Albert Einstein to discuss the orgone accumulator, but nothing further came of their talks. Adding to his eccentricity was his reported sightings of unidentified flying objects (an accepted phenomena today), and his development of a machine for controlling the weather, called the "cloudbuster."

By the late 1940s, rumours and innuendoes were being reported and fed to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). The FDA falsely depicted his institute as a place of sexual orgies, and erroneously described his orgone accumulator as the "orgasm box." As a result, the FDA became concerned with Reich's





work with orgone, and especially his treatment of cancer patients. Reich was, in a small way, partly to blame for his downfall. Naively, he did not take the government threats as seriously as he should have. After all, during the height of the Cold War, it was dangerous not only to be a former Communist Party member, but also to advance controversial changes in sexual mores.

The FDA instituted a concerted effort to gather evidence against Reich. At first, the investigation was based on the allegation that he was leading a sex cult, but because of a lack of evidence they switched the focus to the orgone accumulator. The U.S. constitution states there shall be “no laws” abridging freedom of speech or of the press. Nevertheless, in 1954, the FDA initiated a court injunction to stop all his work activities, including publishing, writing, public speaking, and research.

The injunction was technically disobeyed by an associate of Reich, Dr. Silvert, who had moved a truckload of books and accumulators from storage in Maine to storage in New York. Reich was

thousands of miles away in Arizona at the time. Nevertheless, both were charged with contempt of the injunction on the basis of the interstate transport of mislabeled merchandise (the orgone accumulator). Reich was sentenced to two years in prison and charged a \$10,000 fine for a technicality that usually resulted in only a fine or reprimand.

Books afire


Wilhelm Reich was found dead in his cell in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, on Nov. 3, 1957, coincidentally, a few days before his parole hearing and recommended release. His final manuscript, “Creation,” on which he worked in prison, mysteriously disappeared. An autopsy performed at his family’s request pointed to heart failure. A test for poison proved negative. After his death, the courts would seize and order all his books and scientific papers burned, just as the Gestapo had done 20 years earlier. Ironically, the U.S.

had fought the war against Germany on the basis of crimes against freedom — including the burning of books!

Conspiracy theories abound

Was there a conspiracy to permanently silence Wilhelm Reich? Allegations are rife by proponents, yet concrete evidence is difficult to uncover. Some assert that the drug industry pressured the FDA to ban the orgone accumulator out of fear that, if it was successful, it might replace drug therapy. Similarly, others point a finger at the American Psychiatric Association and the American Medical Association. Finally, it has been said his old communist enemies secretly ran a campaign of disinformation to discredit his discoveries in the West so they alone could secretly continue his work in Russia.

Reich was a man 50 years ahead of his time. His establishment of the importance of the relationship between psyche and soma, and his approach to sexuality, put him many years ahead of the science of his day. Although many of his ideas were eccentric and far off the beaten track, they hardly seemed malignant enough to attract the dire government witch hunt that encompassed him. Ironically, such stifling government action only tends to make such men even bigger than life. The public, ever suspicious of “big brother,” couldn’t help but think there must be some truth to even the most far-fetched theories.

Posthumously, Reich was maliciously depicted by the press as a sex-obsessed mad scientist. He was forgotten until the 1970s when his work began to receive renewed interest. Today, his work lives on with psychiatrists who practice the form of therapy he developed, as well as with various Reichian psychotherapies, such as Bioenergetics and Radix (by institutions such as the Orgone Biophysical Research Laboratory in Greensprings, Oregon, and the Institute for Orgone Science and Orgone Technology in Numbrecht, Germany); in his museum in Rangeley Maine; and in Reichian journals published in six different countries. 

Suggested Readings

1. The American College of Orgonomy Web site at www.orgonomy.org
2. The Wilhelm Reich Museum Web site at www.rangeley.me.com/wilhelmreich
3. The Public Orgonomic Research Exchange (PORE) Web site at www.orgone.org
4. The Orgone Biophysical Research Laboratory, Inc Web site at <http://id.mind.net/community/orgonelab/index.htm>
5. Wilson RA: Wilhelm Reich in Hell. New Falcon Publications, Arizona, 1987.
6. The Skeptics Dictionary Web site at <http://skepdic.com/orgone.html>
7. Last Will and Testament of Wilhelm Reich Web site at www.orgone.org/wr-vs-usa/wr70308a.htm

Photos provided by: The American College of Orgonomy.