

Transcript of Video Interview with Dr. Hoffer

The Institute for Functional Medicine (IFM)

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Interviewer: Dr. Jeffrey Bland, Founder, IFM

Interviewee: Dr. Abram Hoffer

JEFF BLAND: *So this is a really special opportunity, Dr. Hoffer, for me. As you probably know I have valued—as have literally tens of thousands of practitioners—from your work and your insight. And to sit down here in your office in Victoria, British Columbia and know that you are still practicing psychiatry at this level of wisdom that you can bring to this discipline is absolutely amazing and something that we all aspire to do in our own professional lives. And not many of us will be as successful in creating a whole new concept as you have been, but certainly your model of stick-to-it-ness and discipline and dedication to your patients is a model for all of us. So I'd like to just start. We can go all the way back, obviously, to before 1957, but 1957 for me is where I started my understanding of you by reading your first paper published on niacin and schizophrenia.*

ABRAM HOFFER: Right.

JB: *So when I look back and I listen to your story I am reminded of so many interesting things. We could call it fortuitous, or serendipitous, or directed. So here is a person, in your case a gifted PhD in a chemical field, [who] understands about pellagra and niacin as it relates to an entirely different field and discipline from that of psychiatry, then goes to medicine and focuses on psychiatry, and then because of a creative mind makes the connection. And as I recall from your paper, you were maybe the first group to talk about the similarity between pellagra's dementia being schizophreniform with schizophrenia.*

AH: That's correct.

JB: *So that connection is a brilliant leap of abstraction to most people, but for you was clearly obvious.*

AH: It was so terribly obvious I didn't ever think people would object. I thought I would be looked upon as a hero. I thought, oh my God, they're going to love me now. But at that time I was very popular anyway because I was doing a lot of nonsense research that didn't mean anything. So as long as I published papers that had no meaning—you know what I'm talking about—I was popular. But after we published that first paper that you read, guess what. They said, "Oh my God, that guy's a heretic." And at that time of course, as you know, the tranquilizers came in, in '55, '56, '57, and they were financially so rewarding to the big drug companies that they overwhelmed the whole field. And

today psychiatry is owned by the Big Pharm. That's what's happening in psychiatry today.

JB: *So as you made this discovery, I find it extraordinarily interesting from an intellectual development perspective that you took the pre-pellagra's dementia connection to schizophrenia and then you asked questions about what other genetic metabolism disorders that associate with nutrition can we think about that could have central nervous system effects, like hyperhomocysteinemia. And then you talked about B6 and B12 and folate and so your model got extended, and it seemed to be able to be mapped against many of these conditions.*

AH: We had these informal meetings and this was a fantastic amount of information. And that's where we brought Linus Pauling in. I remember we had our meeting in Vancouver at the home of Dr. Ross MacLean and there I am chairman of the meeting, and as the chairman you're not really supposed to do anything, you know, you're supposed to just sit there and be quiet and make sure things are running properly. So I'm listening to all my colleagues, and there are ten of us reading their fantastic papers. They're talking about folic acid. They're talking about B6. They're talking about zinc. Carl Pfeiffer, everyone. They're presenting this amazing information. So I said to myself, *isn't this fantastic. Here is this meeting with very important information no one hears about. We have to publish it.* So David Hawkins is sitting on my right, and he's a good friend of mine. So "David," I said to the group, "we have to publish a book." So they stopped, and since I'm the chairman they have to listen to me. That's the power of the chair. And I said "David, you are going to be the editor." And he gulped. He said, "What?" I said, "Don't worry, we'll help you. Each one of us will submit a chapter." So eventually David said okay, he thought he would do it. So after a while, we started organizing this book. Then it occurred to one of us (I don't know who it was, it might have been David) that maybe we could ask Linus Pauling to become an editor. I'm talking about the book on orthomolecular psychiatry. David wrote to Pauling, and Pauling said, yes he would on one condition, and the condition was that he would have to approve of every paper that would appear in it. So of course said, "fantastic." And that's how that book came out.

JB: *So now you've talked about an epic chapter that I think propelled this whole model that you birthed forward, and that was the 1968 publication in Science Magazine authored by Pauling, the article "Orthomolecular Psychiatry."*

AH: Right.

JB: *It seemed to put the discipline up on the big board. Did that change the visibility for you of what you'd been doing?*

AH: Yes it did. It gave it prestige. It also gave us a lot of work. But I remember what happened, because I had not met Linus Pauling before then, but apparently he had been getting letters from a large number of Americans who had heard about the vitamin

approach and were putting themselves on it and were getting some response. So he was getting more interested, and it fitted in with his own basic concept of molecular medicine. I think this had been gestating in his mind for some time. So one day I get a letter from Linus Pauling: “Dear Dr. Hoffer,” and he said, “I am enclosing a manuscript that I propose to send to Science. Would you please go over it to make sure you are properly quoted.” Now isn’t that amazing?

So then he came along with the word. Now at that time we had been playing with the word “megavitamin” therapy, which I didn’t really like so much because there’s no such thing as a megavitamin, it just doesn’t exist. And when he published the paper I said there is the answer. This term of Linus Pauling’s covers almost everything that we are going to do. And since then I haven’t thought of anything better than the term orthomolecular. But even amongst my colleagues they became very upset, because they were getting used to the term megavitamin therapy. We had our own conservatives, as well as liberals in our own group. So I took on a major role. I said I am going to defend the word orthomolecular until it kills me. It’s going to become *the* word. And since again since I was chairman I had some prestige, and I was able to gradually force the word in. And even with the Journal of Orthomolecular Medicine for many years people wanted me to change the word because orthomolecular was very unpopular. I said *so what?* Of course it’s unpopular, but we’re going to change that. And thank God, Jeff.

JB: *Well let me just kind of bring this to a close saying that this concept of functional medicine that we’ve been working on for about 20 years now, which tries to look at the presaging direction towards disease before the person gets to disease—in other words the dysfunction that precedes the pathology—is really rooted conceptually around the principles of what we call our founding figures. You are one of those founding figures. This work, this construct, not only does it pertain obviously to psychiatric and neurological health but it pertains to the health of the whole body. This is a paradigm that you’ve advanced, along with Williams and along with Dr. Pauling. These are conceptual frames that change the way we view the patient in the exam room and how we will manage them. And on behalf of the whole Institute for Functional Medicine I want to just personally thank you for the so many years of tireless, self-sacrificing work that you’ve put into this, and I can say that your legacy as it pertains to this contribution will remain rich, bright and warm and we will continue to hold the banner very high. We’re going to fight these battles and we’re going to get rationality and truth to prevail. So thank you very, very, much. It’s been a deep pleasure to share this time with you.*

AH: Thank you, Jeff. Actually, all in all, it’s been kind of fun.