

THE RESURRECTION OF WILHELM REICH AND ORGONE THERAPY

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The controversial treatment called orgone therapy is still around and is far more popular than the readers of this journal may assume. It was also called orgasm therapy and vegetotherapy by its originator, Wilhelm Reich. Although Reich died in a federal prison in 1957, his movement flourishes as a form of alternative medicine. Its practitioners, including some mental-health professionals, promote it as a treatment for mental and physical disorders.

This article is an expansion of an earlier article, titled "What Ever Happened to Orgone Therapy," that appeared in *The Maryland Psychiatrist*, Summer 2001 (Vol. 28, No. 1).

THE HISTORY OF ORGONE THERAPY

Recently, I came across *The Function of the Orgasm* by Reich (1973), at a yard sale. For only twenty-five cents, who could resist it? It is one of many books by this charismatic and controversial man. Up to that point, I had never read anything by him, and I thought that his bizarre movement had faded away. I was sorely mistaken. A semi-autobiographical work, first published in 1940, the book describes the development of Reich's career and his thinking over the previous twenty years, from Vienna to his early years in the U.S. He was a psychoanalyst who was recognized for his work on character analysis, but he quickly became impatient with merely verbal therapy. His book describes a departure from psychoanalytic technique in the form of a hands-on "character-analytic vegetotherapy." Reich's advocacy of such beliefs and practices led to increasing conflict with his analytic colleagues, and he was expelled from the

International Psychoanalytic Association in 1934. He had been expelled from the German communist party a year earlier.

Although Reich's strange theories have no scientific validity, Reich himself should interest psychiatrists and psychologists as a case study. Reich claimed that "orgone" treatment could cure mankind of social, political, medical, and psychological ills. He claimed that it was the solution to everything from totalitarianism and war to psychoneurosis and cancer. He also called it orgasmotherapy, because he believed that frequent genital orgasms are a goal of treatment and the key to good health. It is said that he caught syphilis while practicing what he preached, but this claim is unproven. Reich claimed that the function of the orgasm is to discharge energy particles called orgones, thus maintaining a balance of vital forces. According to Reich, this approach led to dramatic therapeutic results. From there, he went on to develop his orgone theory.

After much clinical and experimental "research," orgone theory developed into a cosmic theory. As Reich's thoughts took wing, he accomplished what conventional theoretical physicists can only dream of—a Grand Unified Theory of Everything.

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THE RATIONALE UNDERLYING ORGONE THERAPY

I'll attempt to summarize orgone theory. Good health depends on a proper balance of biological energy in the individual. According to Reich (1973), "biological energy is atmospheric (cosmic) orgone energy" (p. 381). Orgone energy is found throughout the universe and flows from the sun to the earth. The earth's atmosphere is charged with orgone energy, and clouds, thunderstorms, northern lights, and other atmospheric disturbances are due to imbalances in atmospheric levels of it. Microscopic, blue vesicles, which Reich called "bions," are charged with orgone energy and are essential to living cells. Reich (1973) even claimed to have seen them under the microscope. Although bions are "developed from inorganic matter, they propagate like bacteria" (p. 383). Orgone energy seems to be the basis of life, but can be toxic in excess, according to Reich.

As with atmospheric disturbances, human mental and physical disturbances are due to imbalances in orgone levels. A healthy balance of orgone energy is achieved by absorbing orgones from the atmosphere and discharging them through frequent genital orgasms. Character armor is one of the causes of orgone imbalance. Besides mental illness, orgone imbalance leads to such things as sexual impotence, dictatorship, war, and cancer. As Reich predicted, there are schisms among his followers. E. F. Baker, M.D., the editor of the *Journal of Orgonomy*, complained that "Wilhelm Reich has been incredibly misunderstood and maligned, and almost everything he has written has been misinterpreted. Particularly is this true of his sexual theories. The usual distortion is that he advocated 'free' sexual expression—'obey that impulse'—amounting to a wild and frantic promiscuity. Actually, medical orgonomy as developed by Reich is a rather puritanical discipline." (See http://www.orgonomy.org/article_008p3.html.)

Reich (1973) had an explanation for the way orgone treatment cures cancer and other physical disorders. He said, "Orgone has a parasympatheticotonic effect. It kills cancer cells and many kinds of bacteria. Our experiments with cancer therapy are based on these biological characteristics" (p. 385).

Years of "research" into cosmic forces led Reich to devise a method of helping patients accumulate cosmic energy in the form of orgones that could later be discharged in healthy orgasms. He devised a way of trapping cosmic orgone energy in a box and channeling it into a person sitting in it. Thus was born his Orgone Box or Orgone Accumulator. It would cure everything from psychoneurosis to cancer. These boxes sold like hot-

cakes. By this time, he was living in the U.S. The sale of these instruments soon attracted the attention of the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

In 1954, the FDA issued a complaint for an injunction against Reich, charging that he had violated the Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act by delivering misbranded and adulterated devices through interstate commerce and by making false and misleading claims. Reich's Accumulators were deemed a sham, and orgone energy nonexistent. An injunction was granted. Reich was later jailed for violating the injunction and died in prison from an apparent heart attack in 1957 at age 60. To this day, his followers portray him as a martyr.

Based on Reich's early years, it would have been hard to predict this tragic ending. Brilliant and energetic, he seems to have been well-accepted professionally for a time. But like many of Freud's disciples, he diverged more and more from the psychoanalytic mainstream. According to Reich, his colleagues began saying he was psychotic. Indeed, many thought so. This did not deter him from going his own way and developing a large international following. There can be no doubt that he had a significant and lasting impact. To this day, his enthusiastic followers continue to spread Reich's message worldwide. Its popularity seems to be greatest in the U.S., where practitioners abound.

ORGONE THERAPY TODAY

Rather than dying out, Reich's movement seems to be growing. Many, (or perhaps most) of his books, including *The Function of the Orgasm*, are still in print and still popular. When I recently (December 2005) searched for "Wilhelm Reich" on the World Wide Web using a common search engine, there were about 6,450,000 results, in many languages.

Orgone therapy is frequently advertised on alternative-medicine sites, along with other treatments such as Therapeutic Touch, Reiki, herbal therapy, chiropractic, naturopathy, acupuncture, pyramid therapy, shamanism, and high-colonic enemas. There is an increasing degree of overlapping and blending of orgone therapy with New Age and other therapies that manipulate the patient's "biofields," such as Therapeutic Touch and Reiki. "Biofield" is a pseudoscientific term often used synonymously with "orgone energy." One can also find foundations and "research institutes" dedicated to the promotion of Reich's beliefs and practices. At least two of these institutes are located in the U.S.

You may be surprised to discover that there is even

an organization of psychiatrists known as the American College of Orgonomy that promotes Reich's theories and methods. You'll find it at <http://www.orgonomy.org>. Its *Journal of Orgonomy* contains articles describing the use of orgone therapy for treating a wide variety of conditions, including bipolar disorder and schizophrenia. One must wonder how these practices affect malpractice-insurance premiums. You can easily find the nearest medical orgone therapist on the Internet.

Orgone boxes and other types of Orgone Accumulators are widely advertised and sold over the Internet and in various outlets. To avoid further trouble with the FDA, disclaimers are used, but the message still emerges that the boxes possess therapeutic value for a wide variety of physical and emotional problems. One can also buy Orgone Accumulators to treat diseases of pets or to help one's garden grow. Purchasers are warned to avoid orgone overdose. The label reads: "Warning, misuse of the Orgone Accumulator may lead to symptoms of orgone overdose. Leave the accumulator and call the Doctor immediately." I suppose this warning tells us that even placebo reactions can be toxic.

ORGONE THERAPY AND ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE

Alternative medicine is gaining increasing acceptance as shown by the addition of alternative-medicine sections to some general hospitals and to the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Even some medical schools include such materials in their curriculums. The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) (<http://nccam.nih.gov/>) is a thriving section of the NIH. Among other activities, this center provides funding for dubious "research" into fringe treatments. In actuality, its chief function seems to be to promote alternative therapies rather than to investigate them. Psychiatrist James S. Gordon, M.D., has long been a major force behind NCCAM. It is highly significant that he is an advocate of orgone therapy and other forms of aberrant treatment, as described at the following link: <http://web.archive.org/web/20021010023134/www.quackwatch.org/11Ind/gordon2.html>.

The origins of NCCAM go back to 1992, when its precursor started with a budget of \$2 million. The 2004 budget was \$116.9 million. Cancer biologist Saul Green has spoken of the low scientific standards and mostly useless results of the meager reports coming from NCCAM-supported studies. As quoted by Maher (2002) at http://www.the-scientist.com/yr2002/dec/research2_021209.html, Green could have been speaking for many medical scientists when he called NCCAM a boondoggle that should be shut down. In a similar vein, *Time* columnist Leon Jaroff (2002) wrote "Wasting Big Bucks on Alternative Medicine." Unfortunately, Capitol Hill isn't listening.

With substantial help from NCCAM and the politicians behind it, antiscientific alternative therapies seem to be rapidly overtaking conventional medicine in popularity and market share. It has been estimated that in 1997, the \$27 billion spent on alternative therapies was comparable with the amount spent on all physician services for that year. This does not bode well for the health of the American people or for the financing of scientific medicine. Until recent years, hospitals, physicians, and government agencies held the line against unscientific treatments and outright quack remedies. The line is now crumbling. If Reich were alive today and promoting his methods, would the government prosecute him or would it reward him with a research grant from NIH? What's your guess?

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