

OBITUARIES

Paul Fleiss

Controversial paediatrician who promoted breastfeeding, opposed male circumcision, and whose story was told in a “made-for-TV” movie

Ned Stafford *Hamburg*

Paul Fleiss (b 1933), died at his home on 19 July 2014.



[Image: PA/AP]

Paul Fleiss was a man of many contrasts. As a paediatrician he was both scorned and revered. Parents of his patients appreciated his gentle bedside manner. Medical colleagues sometimes ridiculed his controversial views, including his outspoken opposition to male circumcision, which he felt was barbaric.

Based in Los Angeles, Fleiss cared for the children of several Hollywood celebrities, some of whose photographs adorned his office wall. But he also cared for children of low income families who could not afford to pay him. He made house calls and practised medicine until shortly before his death.

After his death, tributes from parents of patients and others were posted on the internet. One mother, Andrea Richards, wrote in *Los Angeles* magazine: “Not only could I call his office and get an appointment in mere minutes, he also gave me his cell phone number (what doctor does that?) and never minded when I dared to use it.”¹

Jay Gordon, assistant professor of paediatrics at UCLA Medical School and a well known Los Angeles based paediatrician, first

met Fleiss in 1977 during his residency at Children’s Hospital Los Angeles. He describes Fleiss as “a doctor ahead of his time.”

Gordon told *The BMJ* that Fleiss’s contributions include “promoting breastfeeding help for all mothers and speaking knowledgeably about an infant’s microbiome—their intestinal bacteria crucial to optimal health—three decades ahead of other docs.” He adds: “Paul Fleiss’s advocacy for breastfeeding has probably saved the lives of babies throughout the world.”

William M London, professor of public health at California State University in Los Angeles, has a contrasting perception of Fleiss. London writes that Fleiss was dogmatic in his opposition to formula feeding, pasteurisation, circumcision, and swaddling. He also helped parents avoid giving their children mandatory immunisations and individually tailored the care of children of parents who denied that HIV was the causal agent of AIDS. London acknowledges there are “subcultures that embrace the aberrant practices he promoted.” London believes, however, that Fleiss’s influence did not extend much beyond those subcultures. “I don’t think he had an impact on how most paediatricians practise medicine since his most publicised views were at odds with conclusions of evidence based reviews,” London told *The BMJ*. “False medical prophets like Dr Fleiss often have devoted followings of patients and fringe practitioners.”

Paul Murray Fleiss was born on 8 September 1933 in Detroit, Michigan. He trained in Detroit as a pharmacist and osteopath before moving to Los Angeles, according to a 1995 news article in the *Los Angeles Times*. He then took advantage of a 1962 California law that, for a brief time, allowed conversion of an osteopath degree to a medical degree, allowing him to train in paediatrics as a resident at what is now Los Angeles County+USC Medical Center.²

The *Los Angeles Times* article described Fleiss as an unconventional “paediatrician, scholar, and lecturer” and “one of southern California’s most sought after physicians.” The article is a prime example of one constant during Fleiss’s life and medical career: he was often in the public spotlight in the glitz capital of the world—sometimes because of his career in medicine, and other times for his personal life.

In 1994 his daughter, Heidi Fleiss, was arrested on charges of operating a prostitution service in Los Angeles. Her customers

were said to include some of Hollywood's biggest movie stars. The arrest made national headlines and Heidi Fleiss was dubbed the "Hollywood Madam." Dr Fleiss was charged with conspiring to hide profits from his daughter's business, including signing a mortgage on a luxury home used as her headquarters, and subsequently became a major part of the news story.

Fleiss pleaded guilty, and on the day of his sentencing in 1995 the courtroom was packed with his supporters. The court declined to send him to prison, or suspend his licence to practise medicine. Instead, he was sentenced to three years' probation, fined \$50 000, and ordered to perform 625 hours of community service. Outside the courtroom, Fleiss said: "I never intended to cheat or lie or steal. I only wanted to help my daughter."

A year later Fleiss was in the news again. This time he stood before reporters and photographers outside Good Samaritan Hospital in Los Angeles, to announce that pop singer Madonna had given birth to a baby girl.

A "made-for-TV" movie about him and his daughter was aired in 1996 with the title, *The Good Doctor: the Paul Fleiss Story*.^{3,4} The movie told the story of his daughter Heidi, through flashbacks told by Dr Fleiss. The title of the movie was later changed to the more provocative: *The Making of a Hollywood Madam*.

Fleiss was author or coauthor of three books, including *What Your Doctor May Not Tell You About Circumcision*.

The 1995 *Los Angeles Times* profile noted that Fleiss was "occasionally the object of malpractice complaints." Of the five complaints found in court records as of 1995, two ended in out of court settlements, with the others dropped, or won by Fleiss.²

In 2006, the Medical Board of California accused Fleiss of "gross negligence" in his treatment of a 3 year old girl who died from AIDS-related pneumonia, saying that Fleiss did not ensure

that the girl was tested for HIV or note in his records that her parents had refused testing.⁵ The medical board eventually allowed Fleiss to keep his licence after he agreed to allow monitoring of his practice, improve record keeping, and other measures.⁶ William M London, in an unfavourable online article, writes in detail about some of the malpractice complaints.⁷

Gordon says Fleiss was "a man of tremendous honesty, integrity and generosity," who was "unafraid to challenge outdated wisdom" about the health of babies and families. "He taught dozens and dozens of doctors about listening to parents over his 50-plus years in practice—I have never met a better teacher." He adds: "Paul was the most courageous doctor I have ever met."

Fleiss's marriage to Elissa Ash ended in divorce. He leaves four daughters and a son. Another son died in a drowning accident.

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- 3 Clifton J. Review: 'The good doctor: the Paul Fleiss story.' *Variety*. 1996. <http://variety.com/1996/tv/reviews/the-good-doctor-the-paul-fleiss-story-1200444909/>.
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- 5 Ormstein C. DA won't charge HIV skeptic. *Los Angeles Times*. 2006. <http://www.latimes.com/local/la-me-christine-maggiore16-2006sep16-story.html>.
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