

ESCAPE FROM DARKNESS

Dr. Frederic Flach, MD '51, a psychiatrist and adjunct associate professor at the New York Hospital-Cornell Medical Center, recently led a research team who found that psychiatric patients diagnosed as schizophrenic or with affective disorders also often suffer from serious visual difficulties.

That would be news in itself except Dr. Flach's research probably would not have headed in this direction without a painful family connection.

At 13 Dr. Flach's daughter, Rickie, was diagnosed as a schizophrenic. And for the next decade she was transferred in and out of mental institutions and half-way houses without showing any sign of improvement. But she did recover and today Rickie Flach Hartman is married, has three children and lives in Daytona Beach, Florida where she works as a licensed practical nurse.

As a child Rickie Flach seemed withdrawn and often showed erratic, self-destructive behavior. Her parents, with access to some of the best research facilities in the country, placed her in a range of treatment programs from psychotherapy to drug rehabilitation and electric shock. Finally in 1975, as Dr. Flach seemed to be running out of options, he learned almost by chance about Dr. Melvin Kaplan, a developmental optometrist.

After an examination, Rickie Flach at 23, was diagnosed as having a visual disorder and a slight nutritional deficiency. Those factors, combined with watching and imitating other institutionalized patients as a child accounted for her behavior.

The exam showed that she was functionally blind and probably had been so since she turned three. She could only see through what appeared to her as a small depthless tunnel. She had trouble with spatial relationships and it took great concentration to hold together a stable visual



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His daughter's case helps a medical professor link visual disorders to schizophrenia

image. Under stress her entire visual system would shut down, which Dr. Flach felt accounted for why as a child she seemed accident prone, had trouble in school and was unusually afraid of the dark. Growing up Rickie Flach assumed this was the way everyone saw things.

Yet through visual therapy and a nutritional adjustment—her blood histamine level was low and her copper level a little high—she was able to recover.

Flach and his daughter recently published a book, *Rickie* (Fawcett Columbine) about their ordeal and discovery. Dr. Flach is also the author of *Resilience* and *The Secret Strength of Depression*. But the search for a way to help his daughter convinced him that her condition was probably not uncommon and that led to further clinical investigations.

The recent study, which was carried out with Dr. Kaplan and Dr. Herbert Bengelsdorf at New York Medical College's Psychiatric Institute, showed that schizophrenic patients and those with affective disorders, like depression, often lack depth perception and the ability to fuse the separate strands of information they receive from each eye onto a single image. This finding could, investigators suggested, lead to different diagnostic tests for schizophrenic and affective disorders.

In a recent interview Rickie Flach Hartman said she's had to "work out her feelings" about the missing decade in her life, but adds that she knows she was given the best treatment available at the time. Her visual disability could not be detected through standard eye examinations and only now is it being recognized as a factor in mental illness.

Still, she says she has had to deal with the stigma of being labeled a "former mental patient." And that stigma she adds is what really needs to be eradicated, because people can and do get better.