

Fleiss (the father) is placed on probation

The state medical board sanctions the physician for failing to maintain adequate records.

By Carla Hall, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer

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You might wonder whether a doctor with a history that includes a felony conviction in 1995, a public reprimand and a one-year term of probation from the Medical Board of California in 1996 has trouble keeping patients and attracting new ones.

But Dr. Paul Fleiss, a 74-year-old Los Feliz pediatrician and father of the infamous Hollywood madam Heidi Fleiss, is not a typical doctor. And the fact that he began another state medical board probationary period Monday -- this time for 35 months, for failure to maintain adequate records -- seems unlikely to disillusion the devoted legions of parents who take their children to him.

Many of those parents describe Fleiss as gentle and caring, interacting with the children as much as with them.

"It wouldn't matter what time of the day or night I needed him, he would be there -- and he has been," said Trudy Kirkland.

She says that Fleiss has been treating her son since he was a 16-month-old with respiratory inflammation. He is now 9.

Often called unconventional, Fleiss is described as a doctor who is not authoritarian. He is a critic of circumcision, and although he recommends vaccinations for children, he does not insist upon them, according to some of the parents of his young patients.

All that makes him a heroic figure to a coterie of parents who are, themselves, unconventional.

"He's like your old-fashioned doctor who talks to you and listens," said Christine Maggiore. "He's someone you can sit with and weigh options and not be judged or ordered to do things."

Maggiore would know. A prominent critic of the mainstream scientific belief that HIV causes AIDS, Maggiore has tested positive for HIV and takes no medications for it.

Her daughter, Eliza Jane Scovill, was never tested for HIV and was Fleiss' patient until she died at age 3 in May 2005.

After her death was ruled by the coroner to be a result of AIDS-related pneumonia -- a finding that Maggiore disputes -- the medical board investigated Fleiss for gross negligence related to the care of Eliza Jane and another child who tested HIV-positive

and is still alive.

In a settlement reached with the board, Fleiss conceded that he had failed to maintain adequate records.

He agreed to take a record-keeping course (which he has done) and have his practice and records reviewed regularly by a board-approved doctor acting as a monitor.

The board did not find him grossly negligent in the care of any patient.

The board acknowledged in its decision that it was flooded with "over a hundred letters from generations of patients and parents" in support of Fleiss.

"He's taken care of people who might otherwise have slipped between the cracks," said Santa Monica pediatrician Jay Gordon, who is known for his criticism of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's vaccination schedule for children. "And when one interfaces with people who are very interested in alternative answers, it makes practice a little more difficult and a little tricky."

Fleiss actually did not see Eliza Jane Scovill in the last few weeks of her life, as she was becoming acutely ill. Gordon, who had also treated her regularly, did see her 11 days before her death -- when she appeared to have an ear infection -- and later publicly lamented that she had never been tested for HIV.

However, on Monday, he didn't lay that responsibility at Fleiss' feet. "The truth is, I don't know what he saw and when he saw it. I wish she had been tested -- for a lot of reasons, not the least of which is it would have brought a lot more clarity," Gordon said.

Gordon believes Fleiss is willing to work with parents who have unorthodox views about treatment. "What he did -- and to a certain extent what I did -- was to say, 'Look, we'll meet you where you are, even if we don't completely agree.' Whatever he did, he would do it in the best interest of a child."

Fleiss did not return a reporter's phone calls, but according to his attorney, Gary Wittenberg, his client "understands the standard of practice is that HIV causes AIDS, and he will act accordingly."