

WHITAKER PAVED WAY IN FAMILY THERAPY

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By William Wineke

A report last week suggested that mildly depressed people could be helped as much by a computer as by a therapist -- but the authors of that report never met Carl Whitaker .

Whitaker, 83, a retired UW-Medical School psychiatrist, died Friday in his home in Nashota after suffering a stroke.

He was considered the "father" of family therapy, and much of what we now take for granted in terms of helping troubled families originated in Whitaker's off-beat mind.

When Whitaker treated a patient, he wanted to treat the patient's entire family. If he had his way, the patient would bring in his brothers, sisters, parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles.

Often, the problems of a troubled child turned out to be the manifestations of a troubled family, he felt.

The way to family health, in Whitaker's mind, was for all the elements of a family to start talking to one another. The role of the therapist was to facilitate that communication.

Again, we take some of that for granted now. Whitaker's insights are even reflected in such current concepts as the Adult Children of Alcoholics movement.

When Whitaker began working in the 1950s, the psychotherapist had a far different role, one aimed mostly at helping troubled individuals fit into their families and not one of looking for other family secrets.

Whitaker was part doctor, part scholar and part shaman.

He was as likely to conduct a therapy session sitting on the floor playing with a child as he was to sit behind a desk asking penetrating questions.

He was a man of immense good humor and he carried that humor into his therapy, a doctor who found no reason to stifle that humor when he entered his office.

The shaman part came from Whitaker's ability to pull insights out of the air. His colleague and biographer, Augustus Napier, also a former Madison therapist, used to marvel at Whitaker's ability to zero in on family problems almost by intuition.

Napier recorded the history of one Whitaker case in a book, "The Family Crucible," which remains a riveting story of how Whitaker worked and what he achieved.

Private funeral services are scheduled for today.