

Family Doctor for a Drug Culture

"I

interesting looking," one coed remarked in what may have been the understatement of the day as Dr. George R. Gay prepared to speak to her undergraduate education class.

Dressed in dark orange pants, colorful print shirt, leather jacket and cap, the 1961 bearded honors graduate in medicine was indeed "interesting looking" as he avoided a didactic approach and held a rap session with students on the pros and cons of marijuana use.

This was one of a series of talks and discussions in which Dr. Gay participated on a return to Columbia last spring. The audiences were large and attentive, a fact for which his subject matter was more responsible than his appearance. For George (better known as "Skip") Gay talked about drugs, particularly the drug culture scene in San Francisco where he practices medicine at The Haight-Ashbury Free Medical Clinic in the Haight-Ashbury district, an area notorious for drug abuse.

The clinic, of which he is medical director and

chief of the heroin clinic and drug detoxification unit, serves a motley group of dropouts from the "straight" society who have usually shunned and been shunned by traditional avenues of medical care. The medical problems of this predominantly young population are compounded by the overwhelming number on hard drugs, chiefly heroin. Operating out of three buildings that were former homes or stores in the area, the clinic offers a comprehensive approach to their problems by providing medical and dental care, drug detoxification, and psychological counseling. Presently, all treatment is on an outpatient basis. For acute illnesses, Dr. Gay arranges for care in a state institution or sometimes enlists the aid of sympathetic private physicians.

His involvement with the clinic began with volunteer work shortly after the clinic was founded in 1967 and grew to a full-time commitment. In what sometimes stretches to a 12-hour day or longer, Dr. Gay sees drug patients in the afternoon



Operating from an old San Francisco home (right), Dr. George Gay serves as friend and doctor to many in the Haight-Ashbury hippie colony. He graduated from the University in '61.





and in the evening covers the medical clinic. Last year, more than 25,000 patients were treated and of these more than 2,000 were seen for heroin addiction.

Most of the clinic staff are volunteers; Dr. Gay is paid a small salary as a public health doctor by the city of San Francisco. For operating costs, the clinic depends on public donations and various benefits, some organized by rock musical groups. ("Big Brother," "Creedence Clearwater Revival," etc.)

All this seems a long way from the medical career on which Skip Gay originally embarked. In addition to scholastic achievement, he was known during his medical school days for his work on "MUtation," the School of Medicine yearbook which he helped start in 1960 and for which he drew numerous hilarious cartoons. He was yearbook editor his senior year and these first editions set the style for subsequent "MUtations."

After completing a residency in anesthesiology at the Medical Center and at Boston Children's Hospital (Harvard), he went into private practice and later returned to academic medicine as an assistant professor at the University of Chicago. During another stint at private practice in California, he began volunteering at the clinic.

"I found myself going more and more often to the clinic," he says. "Haight-Ashbury offered the better part of two worlds—an opportunity to practice good clinical medicine and to express freedom in my own personal life and dress."

A change in personal philosophy was expressed outwardly as long hair and beard replaced the sheared and shaved look. His dress went from Brooks Brothers conservative to what might be called "clean hippie." His appearance, he notes, is a way of establishing rapport with his patients as well as a personal statement of what he rejects in the so-called straight society.

At the same time he rid himself of such affluent trappings as a Corvette and an expensive Sausalito apartment and moved into what he describes as a "funky apartment over a hamburger joint."

Perhaps, most important, his clinic practice provides personal fulfillment. The rapport with his co-workers, he says, is particularly satisfying as are

his efforts to help others understand the drug problem. In this regard, he has served on various local and national committees concerned with drug abuse; and lectures extensively on the toxicology, psychology, and sociology of the drug culture in the Bay area and throughout the country.

Then there are the patients themselves. Although drug addicts rarely express gratitude for care, he points out "there is a feeling among the Haight people that I am their doctor, so it is a kind of family practice. Also, I perform many acute resuscitations and it is very satisfying to bring these patients back from the edge."

The patient-doctor relationship at the clinic is one of the keys to its success. "Skip has fantastic rapport with the kids," Charles Sheppard, a 1971 graduate of the School of Medicine who spent several months of his free time working at the clinic, says, "Part of what he does is a non-judgmental approach: 'you want to get off drugs, I'll help you.' Not 'I think you should get off drugs.' Skip is very accepting of them as people and they're a culture used to being rejected."

Honesty is what is desperately needed in drug education today, according to Gay. "Drug education carried out early and honestly is the only way to get through. We need a concerted community effort involving concerned and honest education at all levels, with health and law officials working together. We've got to quit throwing drug offenders in jails. This can only compound the problem by causing criminal indoctrination."

The emergence of a new type of drug patient, which he labels the "middle-class junkie," necessitates new approaches to treatment.

It is this middle-class junkie—white and suburban-bred as opposed to the black, ghetto-born addict—that he treats in large numbers in Haight-Ashbury.

Through a government grant, he plans to expand the clinic into what he hopes will become a prototype treatment center for new forms of drug therapy in the country. Facilities for inpatient care will soon be available as well as a 40-acre commune outside the city for retraining-rehabilitation programs.

By Carol Achord