

DR. VALERIE VELKES

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One of the Founders of Family Therapy in Israel

<http://esra-magazine.com/blog/post/valerie-velkes>

Dr. Valerie Velkes sits opposite us in her impeccable lounge. Plants and antiques give the lounge - high up and near the sea - a feeling of South Africa. Val (as she is called), petite, with auburn hair and green eyes, looks easily 20 years younger than her actual age. Her secretary, who organizes both her busy private practice and her charitable association, is in another room. Her blue-eyed, smiling husband of more than 50 years is working on a computer in his study. Their devotion and commitment to each other is at the base of a close family – four children, grandchildren and great grandchildren.

Behind Val, their cat jumps up on the dining room table and walks across it with confidence before jumping down. As an experienced family therapist, supervisor and teacher, Val has been talking for years with students and clients about the importance of wise boundaries for the health of the family. This belief in boundaries does not extend to Velkes' family animals which, if they could talk, would say that they are the lucky children of loving and indulgent parents.

Val was the daughter of a loved family doctor in Sea Point and a mother who was a musician and concert pianist. Drawn both to medicine and the stage, she chose medicine, specialized in psychiatry and found expression for her love of drama in the exciting new field of family therapy.

Towards the end of the 1960s, Val was working in the Eating Disorders Unit at Groote Schuur Hospital in Cape Town. Patients were seen in individual therapy. Val was treating a young woman who developed anorexia after her brother had been killed, and who felt that her parents would rather that she had died and their son had lived. Val felt strongly that she had to see the family members together, and this is what she did. The therapy was vastly successful, which led Val to teaching other staff members in this unit to start to think in terms of systems. Thus began Val's career in family therapy, a method according to which she had instinctively started working with families in Cape Town, South Africa.

Soon she would discover that others around the world were beginning to treat patients in a family context. One of the most influential of founding fathers of this new approach was Dr. Salvador Minuchin, who was born in Argentina. His center for family therapy was in Philadelphia, and the words "Philadelphia Child Guidance Clinic" produced a shock of excitement to anyone interested in this brave new world.

At the end of the 1960s, Don Bloch - legendary head of the Ackerman Family Therapy Institute in New York - presented a paper and a video of family therapy work being done at Ackerman, at a psychiatric conference in South Africa at which Val was present. She and Carole Phillips, a social worker, started using and teaching this new approach at the Child Guidance Unit of Red Cross Children's Hospital.

Soon after, Val was asked to open an adolescent unit at Valkenberg Mental Hospital. To her everlasting credit, on hearing that the adolescent unit was intended for white youngsters only, Val refused to take it on unless there was a section for colored youngsters as well. In her work with these young people, Val started to invite family members in for sessions, and she also visited the homes of her young clients in order to gain therapeutic access to their significant others. Today, a plaque in Lilienbloem Hospital honors Val for this pioneering work.

Val is one of the rare psychiatrists who, in addition to her knowledge of the body and of medications, is deeply versed in human interaction.

During one of her trips to Philadelphia to the Minuchin Training Center of Family Therapy, in the early 70s, Val met Dr. Avner Barcai, a child psychiatrist from Israel, and a brilliant family therapist and teacher whom Minuchin had invited to take over the directorship of the clinic. Avner asked Val if she would be interested in immigrating to Israel and opening Israel's first private freestanding Family Therapy Clinic and Training Center. Feeling that this was a great opportunity, and as both she and Neville were already attracted to living in Israel, Val decided to do this. It was a huge decision and a major challenge that had to be taken under pressure of time. Val recounted the stress on her family and teenage children when they first came to Israel, and admitted that the change and adjustment were daunting. Val and Avner opened the Barcai Family Therapy Center in Tel Aviv. Bernice and I started training there in the late 70s, as did many of Israel's leading family therapists.

Shortly after the Velkes family came to Israel, and in the midst of the excitement of establishing the center and the struggle to adjust to a new country, Val's mother fell ill. Val went to be with her in South Africa and, sadly, her mother died shortly thereafter. This blow was followed by another. In the middle of a fateful night Val received a frantic call from Avner's wife that Avner, 46, had suffered a massive heart attack.

It was Val's characteristic strength, energy and optimism which, with the help of a close associate, Shosh Admati, enabled Val to build the institute into the strong presence that it still is today on the family therapy stage. Travelling widely to participate in international conferences in the US and Europe, Val invited and brought out to Israel famous teachers of family therapy - Florence Kaslow, Luigi Boscolo, Gianfranco Checcin, Matteo Palazolli, Camillo Loredano, Salvador Minuchin, Mario Andolfi, Michael White (brilliant founder of Narrative Therapy), and many others. She thus provided Israeli family therapists with the wonderful opportunity to learn from the best people in the field without having to find the money to travel overseas and pay for lodgings and a conference. Today, Israel is acknowledged as one of the important centers of family therapy.

The Velkes story continues: After an almost miraculously successful treatment which she had given, together with a visiting South African psychologist who had come to train at the institute, the young patient's grateful father donated the funds for Val and Shosh to establish an association for the Advancement of Family Therapy in Israel.

Moreover, Val was asked by the Psychiatric Department of the Schneider Children's Hospital to start a family therapy training program for staff members who were working with critically ill and dying children and their families. Thus was established, with the help of a generous benefactor, the Sarah Cohen Unit for Family Centered Therapy and Healthcare. It had been functioning for a few years when Val spotted one of her patients in the corridor - the mother of a young girl who had been in Val's treatment. This was at the time of the 2nd Intifada and this young patient had been critically injured in a bomb blast in a mall and was in the Intensive Care Unit on life support. Sitting with her parents and other distraught parents in the waiting room, an informal group therapy developed. When their daughter died, Val used the money in her foundation to start support groups for families who had been subjected to trauma. This project started off in cooperation with the Mandel Foundation established by Sherri and Seth Mandel after the murder of their young son, Kobi.

In the midst of all this, Val and some colleagues opened a small, private center for the treatment of addiction. This was in the 90s, and ahead of its time. It did not manage to stay afloat financially, but the therapeutic program which included groups, family work, family groups, working with animals, meditation and campfire-singing, provided a rich experience

for the clients, some of whom still, to this day, phone to say thank you for the treatment that gave them a second chance.

We both trained at Barcai, and Val was our teacher. In those early days of the profession here in Israel, Val - behind the one-way mirror, providing live supervision for the therapist in the therapy room with the family in treatment - would ask, "What are they saying"? At the time her Hebrew was not good enough to follow the intricacies of the verbal communication in the session. All her students remember how, with the help of translation and with her understanding of and experience with family systems, she would unerringly feel and understand the family dynamics, and guide the trainee therapist in the right direction and intervention.

Family Therapy in Israel owes a deep debt of gratitude to this courageous, gifted, optimistic woman who was one its founders and who has contributed so greatly to its establishment and development, and to many of us who are practicing family therapists today.