

Come Heal This Sickness

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I take for my text these words from the Hippocratic Oath:

You will lead your lives and practice your art in uprightness and honor; that whatsoever house you shall enter, it shall be for the good of the sick to the utmost of your power, you holding yourselves far aloof from wrong, from corruption, from the tempting of others to vice.

At the outset, I would make it clear that I hold no brief for mere pledges—even pledges as noble as this one. I observe that personal resolutions are more often broken than honored; few of us have the strength of character to resist minor temptations. Loyalty oaths are no more observed than wedding vows. Pledges of Allegiance to the flag are mostly meaningless mumbles, pretty words relegated to the habit category. Oaths to uphold the Constitution, with a hand on the Bible, are recited as blandly by those who would wreck it as by others who seek its preservation. And when assessing the wide range of performance observed in M.D.s, who are traditionally bound by the Hippocratic Oath if not personally pledged to it, I remain just as unimpressed with “canned” oaths. Rectitude isn’t to be acquired, persons of quality are not fashioned, by any device which begins with “Repeat after me.” The words must become flesh, so to speak, and this requires more than an occasional recitation.

Secondly, I do not think of you doctors as requiring more virtue than others by reason of the career you have chosen. Honorable relationships are as much required between aircraft makers and their customers as between you and your patients. Righteousness is as appropriate for me or a plumber as for the Pope or an M.D. I make this point only to emphasize that occupational category has nothing whatsoever to do with honor and quality. Morality is individual, not collective. For M.D.s, as I observe them, are no less the victims of passions and nonsense or more the exemplars of honor and quality than are clergymen, teachers, businessmen, or whoever. You run the same moral and intellectual gamut as do the rest of us!

Meaningful Words

Let us now take a few words from the Hippocratic Oath and note how narrowly they are interpreted by some men in your profession and how broadly an M.D. of excellence and quality might render their meaning to himself.

What, for instance, is meant by “whatsoever house you

shall enter”? Narrowly, it means no more than some patient’s abode. But could this not be thought of as whatsoever life your activities—medical, political, or otherwise—enter into or impinge upon? A person of quality will comport himself with rectitude, with or without the tools of his trade, regardless of whose “house” he’s in.

And how are we to interpret “the sick”? Narrowly, this means only those with some physical or psychic ailment listed in a medical dictionary. But an M.D. with a broader view knows that there is a sickness more pervasive than any he normally treats. This sickness is more profound and more dangerous than a virus infection, or a loss of blood, or a shortage of glandular secretions, or whatever. Analogous to a virus is a fearful belief, namely, the notion that it is proper to feather one’s own nest at the expense of others. The virus equates to this belief—that is, it is an agent that infects and multiplies and causes widespread effects. And, along with this goes the loss of integrity and the shortage of self-responsibility. This is a spiritual sickness, a degenerative disease of the soul, one that the Higher Law beckons the person of quality to come and heal.

Next, reflect upon “far aloof from wrong, from corruption.” I lay particular emphasis on these words not only because they present such a wide range of possible interpretation but because they bring me to the very heart of my thesis.

By reason of the intimacy and confidence generally accorded those in your profession, it is easy to see why every precaution should be taken against wrong and corruption. Doctor-patient relationships should be free from wrongdoing, right down to presenting an honest bill for services rendered. But these, while important, are minor aspects of rectitude, and fall within a narrow interpretation of the Hippocratic Oath. What about the broad and really significant interpretation of “wrong” and “corruption”?

Men and women in your profession have, over the decades, attended to the ills of millions unable to pay for services rendered; the M.D.’s only charge in such cases has been: “Be my guest.” Traditionally, in addition to the practice of medicine, you have, more than any other occupational category known to me, practiced charity. You have been noted as good Samaritans, which accounts, in no small measure, for the high esteem in which you have been held by rich and poor alike. Let me explain why my references are in the past tense.

Imagine, if you will, that a certain doctor of medicine has tired of this tradition and now insists that he be paid in cash for each service rendered. Unable to obtain payment from some of the more destitute of his patients, he goes among the citizenry with a gun, as a robber is wont to do, and extorts from nonpatients and total strangers the unpaid fees. Must we not rate this as wrong? As corruption of the first order? As

a violation of the Hippocratic Oath? If such an act isn't wrong and corrupt, then these words are without meaning.

Actually, today, even in this "mad, mad world" of ours, were any M.D. to behave in this manner he would lose his membership in every medical society and be forever barred from practice. Yet, collectivize and then legalize this very same behavior and, in popular parlance, it will become "good and ennobling" instead of "wrong and corrupt." Not only the populace, but M.D.s by the tens of thousands, have joined in socialized medicine—this "wave of the future" known as Medicare, Medicaid, and other euphemisms. As if association gives absolution! As if mass participation rights a wrong! As if legality alters morality! This is an intellectual sickness that needs analysis.

The Root of the Sickness

A physician, if competent, doesn't apply his treatments merely to surface manifestations of illness. He tries to approach the matter systemically; that is, he attempts to get at the root of it. And we should approach this sickness of the body politic in such a manner, difficult as the diagnosis is.

I suspect this sickness has its genesis in wishes, these being but entertainments of the mind. Few, indeed, are the individuals who do not wish for improved circumstances. They wish for more and better food, housing, education—on and on—including more medical care than they can afford in many cases. Nor can we fault these aspirations. Indeed, when not perverted, human hankering motivates human progress. Wishes, unless in consort with improper methods of fulfillment, are as benign as many other attributes of body and mind.

But now in vogue is a fearful combination of wishes and methods, as fanciful as Aladdin's lamp, and spreading like wildfire: the transmutation of wishes into rights! Do you wish for better housing? Then better housing is a right. Do you wish for a Gateway Arch in St. Louis, a Mall in Fresno, higher returns for goods and services, shorter hours of labor, protection from competition? Then these are rights. Do you wish for free medical care? Then free medical care is a right!

And what is the nature of the genie called upon to transmute wishes into rights? It is organized police force: government. It extorts from all, allocating the legalized loot to those who effectively make their wishes heard. There is no greater indictment of education in America than the fact that so many are victims of this hallucinatory sickness.

The extortion of income from everyone, funneling enormous amounts into the coffers of hospitals and M.D.s, has, as might be expected whenever the market is abandoned, brought on a shortage of both hospitals and M.D.s; and we are witnessing only the beginning. That the quality of medical services will decline under this system and that corruption will increase is predictable whether we resort to analysis and reasoning or to the dismal record of all such attempts, be they in England, Canada, Sweden, the United States, or wherever. Most M.D.s know this, so I shall not dwell on it further. But in a stampede of cases, this more or less common knowledge on the part of M.D.s is relegated to second place by a force that is more powerful: personal financial enrichment! In any occupational category—your profession included—there is always a rush

to where the "almighty dollar" is, a lure that often swerves man from his principles, from the straight and narrow. Only M.D.s of unusual quality will not yield not to this temptation!

Let Freedom Be the Cure

How do we go about healing this sickness? We must acquire an understanding that wishes, regardless of how numerous, do not constitute a right. I have no more right to your professional attention than you have a claim on me to wash your dishes. We are dealing with an absurdity that, once established as such, will vanish as did the earth-is-flat absurdity. That a wish does not make a right is so nearly self-evident by mere assertion that only cursory comment is warranted.

Absolute self-subsistence is impossible. We live and prosper by specialization and exchange. None of us can exist solely by our own efforts, so each of us specializes according to his bent or talents, and whether we prosper or not is substantially determined by what and how much others will give in exchange for what we have to offer. In a free society, that is! In a word, others tend to encourage me to specialize at what is of value to them, and I tend to encourage them to specialize at what is of value to me. This is how people in a free society exert their wishes. But note that these wishes do not carry with them any right on my part to command what others shall produce or any right to force on them the terms of exchange.

When the notion that a wish is a right is put into effect by police force—the only way it can be done—then specialization is no longer guided by consumer wishes, nor are the terms of exchange. What happens under Medicare, for instance, is this: M.D.s give of their labors, and the senior citizen gives substantially nothing in return. Other citizens are then forced to perform labor for which they receive absolutely nothing in return. Exchange is by coercion rather than by free choice.

If we make the simple concession that no one should be forced to labor for no return, then the absurdity of socialized medicine is clear. Were M.D.s forced to perform their services for nothing, as nonpatients currently are forced to pay for services not received, no person would choose medicine as a career.

I repeat, the fact that many of us wish more medical attention than we can afford does not give us a right to your services or a right to force others to make up the difference, wishes to the contrary notwithstanding! Your services are a scarce economic resource, and precisely because of that scarcity should be priced and otherwise regulated by the laws of supply and demand and open competition, as should every other valuable and scarce commodity or service. Otherwise, your good efforts will be wasted in the hopeless cause of socialism and the welfare state.

I have asserted that the Higher Law beckons persons of quality to heal this sickness, the cure for which is to rid the body politic of the notion that wishes constitute a right.

A Natural Aristocracy among Men

My diagnosis, however, presupposes that the body politic be graced with persons of quality, that is, with an aristocracy in the pink of condition. By an aristocracy I mean what Jefferson meant when he said, "There is a natural aristocracy

among men. The grounds of this are virtue and talents."

Let me explain: The fact that most of you are at present free of the common cold is not because of the absence of the virus. When you are in the pink of condition the virus is harmless. But become overtired or run down and the virus proliferates.

The advocacy of pricing may give the false impression that all transactions must be in monetary terms. But bear in mind that there is psychic as well as monetary profit. An M.D. enjoys a psychic profit when he says to the destitute patient, "Be my guest"....

The same holds true for the body politic as for the human body. The bad ideas (virus) in the minds of men are omnipresent. But they are held in abeyance when the aristocracy is in the pink of condition. However, when men in positions of political, professional, religious, educational, and business leadership give more heed to desires of the flesh and to expediencies of the moment than to moral and spiritual principles, the bad ideas proliferate; they come out of the heads of men as termites from a rotten stump.

Recently, I commented to the proprietor of a well-managed barber shop: "I have never seen any of the hippie long-hairs in your place." He replied, "Oh, no, they would be embarrassed to be seen in here." Men are similarly embarrassed to expose their silly ideas in social situations distinguished by a leadership of first-class citizens.

Noblesse Oblige

Finally, how do you doctors go about "holding yourselves far aloof... from tempting others to vice"?

Bear in mind that high priests are the ones who hold the greatest powers of attraction—they are the ones in whom confidence is most likely to be placed. And a high priest fallen from grace, having forsaken his role as exemplar, could easily tempt others to vice.

Let a known thief commit a robbery, and the only harm is the loss an owner suffers: others are more repulsed than tempted to imitate. But let a person held in high esteem thus defile the moral code, and he will tempt others to vice. "If it's all right for him, why not for me?"

Inasmuch as citizens entrust their lives to M.D.s more than to other specialists, they are inclined to trust you in many matters. They'll even seek and respect your economic and political counsel along with your medical advice.

Now, the more one is respected by others, the more must he bind himself to righteousness; that is, the more rigorously must he adhere to the highest principles he can envision. This is the obligation—the noblesse oblige—of anyone who holds the respect of others. For one to reflect less than the best that is within him is to tempt others to vice and, thus, to violate the Hippocratic Oath. The Higher Law dictates that the more one is respected, the more must one be respectable.

An encouraging thought: You who would heal this sickness can rest assured that good ideas are easy to advance or proliferate whenever the aristocratic spirit is the mode, which is to say, when enough persons aspire to that high standard which establishes the climate for moral healing.

Leonard Read was President of the Foundation for Economic Education.

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