

A Global View of Medicine

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If there is one profession that requires a sound and incisive global view to attain the highest degree of professionalism, it is medicine. It is said that the word profession came into the English lexicon during the Middle Ages to denote learned people engaged in three different kinds of occupations: physicians, lawyers and Christian theologians. Admittedly this word has been widened in its context today to include a wide variety of men of academia. Yet physicians stand out at the zenith of this body of professionals. The World Health Organization has defined health as a fundamental human right. On the other hand, politicians of the 20th century have proclaimed the pursuit of happiness as the most important element of freedom, and in my own view, the quintessential essence of happiness lies in health of the body and mind. Therefore, having accepted the task of the unflinching guardian and promoter of health, it is natural that medicine has become the most highly regarded profession in the human society.

Darwin considers altruism as the hallmark of human society in contrast to societies of other more lowly creatures. The human society cannot build on the principle of survival of the fittest described as the fundamental force of evolution by Darwin. He foresaw the chaos that could be brought about if each member of the society is concerned only with his own survival at the expense of his fellow men's benefits. A society whose members are more altruistic tends to prosper more than the one whose members are more self-centered. The end result of the former is that its members will share and enjoy the fruits of that prosperity. Darwin actually has said that only human society has developed genuine concept of ethics.

If altruism is so important in an open and civilized society, medicine is the embodiment of altruism. Since disease knows no national boundaries, physicians' concern should also transcend the national interests and extend further to the entire human race. We as members of medical profession have learned enough that overstressed patriotism may lead even a medical man of respectable upbringing to perpetrate serious crimes against humanity. Our memory of the Angel of Death, Dr. Mengel at Auschwitz of Nazi Germany and his clique has not faded. Many Nazi

doctors committed atrocious crimes against humanity all in the name of patriotism.

These acts were in serious violation of the ethical standards long developed in the medical profession and the revelation of these atrocities deeply shocked the entire civilized world, especially the medical community. The Nuremberg Code was proclaimed in 1945 and the Helsinki Accord on human rights was promulgated in 1971. The World Medical Association Declaration of Helsinki, which deals with the Ethical Principles for Medical Research Involving Human Subjects has undergone the fourth revision at its 52nd WMA General Assembly at Edinburgh, Scotland in October 2000. All these agreements in my opinion are the direct products of the World War II atrocities, signaling the redefining and reiteration of the goals and conducts of the medical profession.

Why do we I “redefining and reiteration ”? I say this because the compassion for the ill as the foundation for medical ethics and discipline of doctors to do no harm to patients have long become axioms of medicine since the ancient Hellenic period. Did not Hippocrates exhort us not to allow the consideration of the nationality, color of the skin, political opinion, social stature and other discriminatory thinkings to come between the patient and us?

A very imaginative friend of mine has just concluded a survey of his own that revealed that none of the 28 medical students included knew of the existence of Nuremberg Code and only three have heard of Helsinki Declaration Accord. No one was aware of The WMA Declaration of Helsinki. It is for this particular reason that TMAC, Taiwan Medical Accreditation Council that is, demands that each medical school redouble its effort to strengthen the ethics course, to instill in them the spirit of the Declaration, preferably in the form of case study, discussions and debates in which students should play the leading role. In this regard, I am also convinced that PBL is an ideal way to lead students to examine the ethical aspects of each patient case. The global view of medicine can be promoted considerably among students by this type of curriculum.

I would like to call upon my professional colleagues to expand the global view of medicine into a universal view or vision of this amazing universe. We have to realize that any form of life on this globe deserves a respect for right to exist and perpetuate by spawning their offsprings. The medical community should speak out more forcefully on this subject lest we will be lax in protecting life. As Louis Thomas has said that humans in recent decades are increasingly acting like a special species of creature, placing themselves outside of the ecosystem of the universe. A sound universal vision will serve to bring us back to the ecosystem. The impact of this kind

of vision has a far-reaching significance in medicine. It will make doctors more judicious in using antimicrobials and reducing the drug resistance of microorganism. The microbial resistance is outstripping our ability to come up with new drugs to combat pathogenic agents. If this trend continues on, we may soon one day go back to 1930s when we had no weapons against a common pathogen like *Staphylococcus* or *Streptococcus*. We may also become more refrained from consuming fossil fuels, which no doubt will slow down the green house effect blamed for the northbound spread of tropical diseases.

Changing times require us to be especially aware of what kind of world we are facing. Smallpox, declared eradicated from the surface of the globe by WHO in 1979, is now placed on the top of the list of the so-called Category A agents of bioterrorism according to the classification of US CDC. It is estimated one hundred gm of *Bacillus anthracis*, the number two on the same list, has life-destructive capacity that is equivalent to one megaton of hydrogen bomb. *Yersinia pestis* follows as the close number three in the same list. Several countries are considered capable of reintroducing these diseases with malicious cause. On the other hand, facilitated global traveling has brought exotic diseases to new corners of the world. West Nile fever has appeared in almost half of US states since 1999. Ebola virus hit very close to the US capital, a place called Reston in 1989. Even WTO, the product of trade globalization has become a menace to human health. Food products, especially meats that are not properly handled may easily become the carrier of many pathogenic agents. There is a strong indication that irradiation, the main stay of decontamination utilized by food producers, has a limited ability of penetrating food productive. Its effectiveness as a disinfectant is not as reliable as generally believed.

Education is the staple of the methods to develop global or universal vision in the coming generation of doctors as well as ourselves. We have to become physicians capable of keeping abreast with the changes in the human society and assert, adapt and adjust ourselves according to the fundamental ethical principles of our profession. Ethic is the conscience of the public and id dynamic and evolves.

A research scientist named Ron McKay said something appalling. In connection with the genome project, the cloning of Dolly and stem cell research, he said: "We are better than God. Now we can create a perfect living thing according to our desire." Our medical career goals should be dedicated to ideal of promoting harmony, happiness and health in the entire world; we should never allow ourselves to become the instrument of evil ambition to disseminate destruction, despair and diseases.