

## **Health Care : A Calling or Just Another Profession?**

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Quarantine measures adopted by Taipei Municipal Heping Hospital to prevent the spread of severe acute respiratory syndrome have triggered protests from some medical workers. These protests are a warning that we must reflect on a long-forgotten question – is Medicine a profession, or is it a vocation ?

If it is a profession, those people certainly have the right to protest or even fight back when their interests are damaged. However, if it is a vocation, then those health-care workers who were unwilling to fulfill their duties in a difficult time should seek new careers after the quarantine period is over. The government should also help them fulfill their wish.

Since ancient times, the works of physicians and clergymen have been viewed as sacred calling. In other words, they engage in the work of saving people because of their inner calling. It is a ministry, not an occupation. They decide to devote themselves to care for the masses and not to flinch from the task.

Along with the relativization and vulgarization of values, what our forebears believed to be sacred vocations have become mundane jobs. People no longer do such work because of their spiritual calling. Rather, they view it merely as a livelihood. Of course, many medical workers still uphold the spirit of benevolence and quietly dedicate themselves to the work of helping others. I have witnessed many health-care workers and employees from the Department of Health working tirelessly day and night at hospitals and in their offices without making any complaint at this difficult time. Respect spontaneously arose in my heart for them. They deserve our salute.

In a material society - where everything is measured by money, power and status – many people who choose the medical field no longer do it in response to a calling. Rather, they are motivated by the incentive of material gain. The criticism of medical workers in Taiwanese society over the past few decades has been due to the fact that some people work only for their material gain. A sincere devotion to caring for the sick is completely lacking.

The well-known sociologist, Max Weber in his essay on Politics as Vocation, stressed that those who engage in politics only to pursue their personal gains and privileges are politicians not statemen. If they always opts for the middle road and refuse to adopt brave policies to build concrete, strong and indigenous national identity, they are but power-mongers. By the same token, if health-care workers seek

only their own personal gain and refuse to suffer with the sick while an epidemic strikes, they are merely profit-seekers unworthy of people's respect.

Taiwan's education has long failed to nurture in students an attitude of serving people. Medical work therefore is viewed as a profession, not a vocation. The spirit of dedication has been lost.

We should not put all the blame on those protesting at Heping Hospital. Out of concern for their families, they naturally felt agitated when they were suddenly isolated without any advanced warning. It might be a good thing if this event can prompt the public to reflect on the meaning of a "calling". Those who cannot dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to their work but seek only fame and fortune, should drop the idea of becoming medical professionals.

There is certainly no chance to put them to test in peaceful times, but no one knows when a contingency will occur. I hope that SARS challenges can provide the public and those in education circles with an opportunity for soul-searching

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### **Afterthought**

As I ponder more, I wonder if there is a concept of "vocation (calling)" in the Oriental thinking? Mencius, the second most revered sage of Confucianism said, when heaven will confer a great mission upon a person, it will first put him under heavy pressure to train and equip him.....so that he would be able to meet the task given to him later on... This indicates that vocation is not a "priori" but a "posteriori" to the Chinese. In other words, the feeling of being called to accept the challenge of a mission is the result of a series of good education, self-reflection and strenuous training. Environment shapes a person. A good harvest is the result of a hard work. How to educate students so that they can be motivated to dedicate themselves to serve becomes the task we must ponder. A good training will yield good soldiers and well-equipped armies can conquer mountains. In the same token, how to instill in the mind of student a will to serve becomes the task for all educators. No wonder Dr. David Trueman, the former president of Columbia University said: "In the complexities of contemporary existence of specialist who is trained but uneducated, technically skilled but culturally incompetence, is a menace".

The value and meaning of life must be re-discovered and emphasized if a brighter future is to be created.