

Editorial

Paediatrics and the public

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Health care should meet the needs of children and enhance the quality of their life. Care of children is the fundamental job of paediatricians and this can be achieved with the cooperation and support of the people (the public).

Paediatricians were first introduced to this country in the 1940s, at a time when poverty was rife, nutrition and diet much to be desired and medical facilities limited. The high morbidity and mortality was a great challenge to the doctors of the time and they literally spent day and night caring for the children with the assistance and cooperation of the parents (the public). The extended family system, existing at the time, lent support to both family and paediatricians. The public appreciated and respected the doctors, accepted their successes and failures, even death, in the belief that it was the will of God or fate (Karma). Although there was no money for equipment and drugs, there was love and affection between the children and the paediatrician and the public responded with respect and regard for the doctors.

Time and prosperity led to a raised standard of living, improved housing and sanitation and better diet; introduction of immunization led to a decline of infectious diseases. Unfortunately, elimination of diseases such as poliomyelitis and diphtheria gave way to new diseases such as HIV and AIDS. Doctors had also to contend now with more congenital defects and genetic and metabolic disorders. There emerged a comprehensive system of paediatrics, primary care focusing on community and general paediatrics, secondary care covering the treatment of patients in hospitals and tertiary care with the specialist services in major hospitals. Paediatricians had to integrate all these into a single service for children.

Today, the few original paediatricians have been replaced by over a hundred paediatricians in the teaching, provincial, base and district hospitals and the private sector. More facilities are available, increased diagnostic accuracy is made possible by more pathological tests and special investigations such as endoscopy, ultrasound scanning, computerized axial tomography but these investigations are not always available. Economic

growth cannot keep pace with the growth of the population and their ailments. Doctors have acquired more specialized knowledge and good clinical judgment but these must be offered to all with fairness, irrespective of class, race, religion or socioeconomic status.

All these improvements have not led to a satisfied and appreciative public. There is a change in the doctor-patient relationship and change in the public expectations. In addition to technical competence, public want friendship, free discussion of their ailments and doctors who will respect their rights to make decisions about their care. Patients have a confused and limited knowledge of their ailments; they want reassurance and their doubts cleared. They accuse doctors of a lack of satisfactory communication and reluctance to discuss their illnesses. Public accuse doctors of being too busy and giving little time for consultation, giving more consultations than they can cope with and being greedy for money. Doctors, on the other hand, are frustrated, unable to shoulder the deserved and undeserved criticisms. They do not acknowledge their mistakes for fear of litigation, disciplinary action and lowered esteem in the eyes of their colleagues; they cover their lack of confidence with numerous investigations, necessary and unnecessary, prescribing effective and sometimes dangerous drugs.

Public trust in doctors depend on the integrity of the individual doctor and the whole profession. Most patients do trust their individual medical doctors but the public increasingly distrust the medical profession and welcome criticism of doctors. Yet, most doctors are conscientious and highly motivated, and treat children with care and compassion. The challenge to the paediatricians is to keep a happy, trusting and contented public and see that children are not only born healthy but remain so and grow up to be healthy adults.

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