

Editorial

“Medicine in a changing world”. Then....., and now

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A timely and most appropriate article appeared as an Editorial of The Journal of the Lady Ridgeway Hospital for Children, Colombo, in 1957 yes., 57 years ago. The Editor, Dr. Stanley de Silva wrote and published that gem of an article¹. Some excerpts of that Editorial are reproduced below in italics:-

“There are men and classes of men that stand above the common herd; the soldier, the sailor and the shepherd not infrequently, the artist rarely, rarelier still the clergyman, the physician almost as a rule. He is the flower (such as it is) of our civilization; and when that stage of man is done with and only to be marvelled at in history, he would be thought to have shared as little as any in the defects of the period and most notably exhibited the virtues of the race. Generosity he has, such as it is possible to those who practice an art, never to those who drive a trade; discretion tested by a hundred secrets, tact tried in a thousand embarrassments, and what are more important, Herculean cheerfulness and courage, so that he brings air and cheer to the sickroom, and often enough, though not so often as he wishes, brings healing.”

So wrote Robert Louis Stevenson many, many years ago in his preface to “Underworld” but when he did, he probably did not and could not conceive of the possible impact of the modern world on this ancient art. No longer do we see today the type of practitioner he spoke of, or indeed, very rarely. Instead we see the busy doctor rushing from place to place in the fastest of cars, or from one country to another in the quickest of aircraft, whose only care appears to be to get away from one patient to another waiting at the end of the city or even the world. The pace of medicine has leapt up and appears to be soaring to giddy heights.

It is well to pause for a few moments and try to see how the profession has adapted itself to the modern world of today. In a materialistic age there seems to be little time left for high thinking or ideals. The profession is in danger of being classed as a trade and in the grim struggle for existence the tendency is to see what benefits or what gain one can derive out of it. When one suggests that there are easier and quicker methods of making money e.g. selling ice-cream or fish or even firewood, one is faced with the retort that money is the most important

requirement of life today and that if the profession can be utilized to earn it, it certainly should be even exploited for the purpose. This is the tragedy as it is seen in Ceylon.

The Editorial goes on to say a lot more. Ceylon was the name by which this resplendent emerald isle was then known. Reading the content of that editorial, and more so, reading between the lines, there seems to have been various early signs that caused some concern then. The article, written ever so succinctly and so very conscientiously, over half a century ago by one of the doyens of paediatrics of the day, depicts a plethora of apprehensions on the aftermath of what he calls “the rather fast pace of development of medicine”. There is a palpable decry of materialistic benefits accrued by the practitioners of the noble art of medicine. He laments at the obvious dangers faced by the profession. It sounds so much like the beginning of the end.

If the development of medicine was rapid then, what do we call its progression today! Perhaps fast and furious would just about describe it. If there were concerns of quite a few hues then, how about the situation now? Perhaps even more so and even more significantly so now. The work done by a doctor of whatever position, seniority or eminence, has to centre round those all-important persons, the patients. In that context, the concluding lines of that editorial, written so long ago, is as relevant today as it was then. Those lines are as follows:-

The work done by a doctor cannot and should not be assessed in terms of rupees and cents. It is above assessment and should remain so. It is futile to compare the work done by an engineer or civil servant with that done by a doctor. It cannot be compared. A tradition has been created, not by the fancy of a few, but has crystallized after years of experience that a doctor serves the needs of the sick irrespective of the gain or profit involved and in this changing world, it is hoped that such an ideal will prevail, in the minds of the present day medical men and in the minds of those who are aspiring to join this brotherhood of healers, who, all over the world, with commendable sacrifice are practising this ancient art in the interests of suffering humanity.

There is no doubt whatsoever that these pearls of exceptional judgement are of relevance even today. Words of absolute wisdom and superlative jewels of the thoughts of a colossus of the day. It is indeed a priceless treasure of a narrative, to be taken ever so seriously, by one and all.

References

1. de Silva S. Medicine in a changing world. Editorial. *The Journal of the Lady*

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(The original copy of the journal of the quoted reference was very kindly provided to The Sri Lanka College of Paediatricians by Professor Eugene Wickramanayake)