A Remedy for Professional Unrest

It is worthwhile to examine briefly some of the factors of the problem presented by the unsatisfactory relationship between the medical profession and the public and, if possible, find a true solution. The concrete things that seem to underlie our troubles are (1) the various manifestations of what has come to be known as “state medicine,” and (2) the extraordinary growth and popular endorsement of the healing cults. Two general social movements are discernible when one examines the problem; and the actions and reactions engendered by these movements have for the moment erected a specter, which too many of us have mistaken for an issue—the medical profession versus the people.

These two social movements are based on the most primitive biologic attributes. The people are engaged in the primordial task of seeking for the good. Since the first man felt hunger and, finding food, satisfied it; since the first man felt the sweat of labor, and, finding an easier way to obtain bread, grasped it, mankind has been at the task of seeking after good, and, finding good, seeking to make it better. And the way of mankind has from the beginning been the experimental way; for century on century men have cut and tried. That which men have rudely shaped to fit their needs, they have compared with the more cunning workmanship of their neighbors, and slowly, the better has supplanted the good. This is law; it was law for the first man, and it is law for the race. This we all know—but all forget.

“STATE MEDICINE”

That portion of humanity which forms our environment is making some new experiments just now. The social organism has many an ancient hunger and thirst that it has never been able to appease with the incomplete ration it has had to feed on hitherto; it has suffered many a wound and bleeding sore which, through the ages, it has vainly sought to cure, and for which it has suffered many things of many physicians....

This brings us to the other social movement, which, when it strikes the great current of the people's movement, causes the specter that some call an issue to uprear. It is the counter movement of the organized medical profession, and it is based on another primitive biologic attribute—fear.

We physicians are a conservative lot. No matter what our origin, we no sooner graduate and become established in something of a business than we become apostles of the true doctrine of things just as they are; or, if not, then of things somewhat better—for us. We become, in habit of mind, aristocrats, givers of the law to those without, holders of a vested interest, and, true to the type, afraid of any movement that threatens the status quo. True, we are the custodians and interpreters of a certain store of the accumulated knowledge of mankind; but the store belongs to mankind, it is the property of society....

THE HEALING CULTS

What shall we say of the healing cults? They are plagues sent on us for our sins; and not on us only—they are plagues on society as well. Society is plagued with them because of ignorance, credulity, cupidity, prejudice and such like sins, but with those we are not at present concerned. The fact is, though, that society has in many of its units found the medical profession as we exemplify it wanting; the popularity of the cults represents the individual experiments of these units of society in their search for the good; if they had not felt the need, the experiment would not have been undertaken.

Our duty under the circumstances, it seems to me, is self-examination, with minds humbled in the presence of our failures. It does not suffice to comfort ourselves with the thought that we represent the best that has been attained in medicine, nor to take refuge in the thought of what society already owes our profession....

As good physicians and honest men we must examine ourselves and our methods; we must determine wherein we fail the public, and we must, as servants of society, find a way to help our fellow men, ignorant, wilful and superstitious as they often are, in ways that they will follow, and speak to them in language they can understand....

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