Training in Sociology and Public Health
an Essential in Medical Education

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Near the home of my birth, where my youth and young manhood were spent, is one of the foothills of the Appalachian chain, which terminates in Alabama.

This mountain stands out boldly against the southern sky. I have spent hours in my childhood gazing upon it and wondering what was on the other side. In after years, when to the music of a pack of foxhounds and the clatter of a good horse’s hoofs, I reached its highest point, the thing that interested me most on the other side was not the beautiful plains, streams and wooded country, but still higher ranges of mountains in the distance, hiding other things.

I have recalled those dreams of my boyhood in my recent study of the work of the Council on Medical Education in its efforts since 1902 to elevate the standard of medical education in the United States. The history of this splendid work is as fascinating reading as a romance of the Elizabethan age.

As in my boyhood experience, when high ground was reached, higher ground came into view, and point after point has been scaled until we stand today on a pinnacle of excellence unexcelled by any other country; but there is still higher ground beyond which we must reach.

There has been practically no advance in the teaching of preventive medicine in the last quarter of a century. Discoveries of methods of administration and methods of prevention have come forward by leaps and bounds, but they have remained to be learned by the physician after he has taken up his life work, and not in that important period when he is preparing for it. For that reason, habits of medical thought have not been directed along the lines of preventive medicine, but have been confined almost exclusively to the curative side of the science. We shall not reach the highest ground ahead of us until we have introduced into our schools of medical education a course of study which will bring the medical student into easy touch with natural laws governing the transmission and prevention of diseases, the methods to be employed by the health administrators in their control, and the part to be played by the medical profession in the accomplishment of this great task.

It is important to recognize that modern attempts to solve, or, at least, to reach an approximate solution of fundamental problems, have led in our own day to the development of a number of comparatively new sciences associated with the basic human needs: food, shelter, defense and propagation. They are still rudimentary in a large degree and practically unstandardized. For this reason they are likely to be lumped together in our minds under the general title of “the social sciences,” and to receive from us scant consideration or respect. Examined closely, are not every one of these embryonic sciences which deal with the major problems of human existence fundamentally a part of medical science?...

If we grant, for the sake of the premise, that knowledge of remedial and preventive methods is of equal importance to the medical student, I am suggesting, for consideration, five essentials in the latter field which should be made a part of his medical education:

1. He needs to have a sympathetic understanding of the fundamental human problems in relation to the many complexities of modern life, and must become familiar with the trend of the best thinking along social lines.
2. He needs to know the place and function of sanitation in relation to the public welfare, the how and when and why of environmental influence on health....
3. He needs to be well grounded in the control of the communicable diseases and in bacteriology.
4. It is imperative that he should have a knowledge of hygiene, especially in its relation to the social and medical sciences which attempt to improve the race by approximating a solution of the basic problems of human existence....
5. He needs to have a knowledge of psychology in its relation to conduct, with regard both to individuals and to groups, in order that he may truly educate both individuals and groups in right habits of action, by supplying motives which appeal to them.

The Council on Medical Education and Hospitals is recommending to the American Medical Association at this session that the last two years of undergraduate medical study be devoted to the four majors: practice of medicine, surgery, obstetrics and public health....

I believe that more attention to the subjects outlined in the foregoing paragraphs will equip men to render a service to the individual and the community which will eventually bring the practice of medicine to a level of achievement undreamed of in the past. I believe that men who have received such preparation will be ready after their graduation to practice medicine in cooperation with the many and varied agencies for social betterment, with a greater degree of mutual understanding....