The Real Things in Medicine

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The minimum requirements for a career in medicine are a preliminary education, four years in a medical school, and a license to practice. While these requirements are indispensable, they are by no means sufficient. Three higher attributes stand out as real elements that make for a successful physician; without these, real success in medicine is impossible: brains, culture and character.

Brains

Brains are the alpha and omega of the man of medicine. We all recall the artist who, when asked what he mixed his paints with, replied: “With brains, sir.” Not long ago when I was on the way to talk to college students on medicine as a profession, the wife of one of the faculty said: “Tell them that the one thing they ought to have is brains.” She had made my speech. To begin the study of medicine without two good cerebral hemispheres thickly covered with a deep cortical layer is to invite failure. No encouragement should be extended to those about to enter the profession of medicine or to those already in to continue, unless they are supplied abundantly with gray matter. The misfits in medicine, as well as in other occupations, are due largely to a lack of understanding. There are some in the cornfield who ought to be in medicine; there are some in medicine who ought to be in the cornfield.

The study of medicine bestows no more brains and adds not one cubit to the mental stature. It provides only a few more implements of the mind to be used for good or for ill. Unless the roots are deeply planted in the soil of real learning, the study of any science narrowly pursued takes away from the natural resources of the mind more than it puts in. In other words, a finely endowed intellect is needed to carry on in the realm of science, to withstand its temptations toward the illogical, to keep clear headed in the midst of fact and fancy....

Culture

Make no mistake about culture. Culture is refinement, accuracy, poise, resourcefulness...We have been getting too far away from the humanities, from classical education, from academic scholarship, if you please. In the quest of science—and there is no nobler pursuit—we have set up utilitarian courses, called premedical and certainly premeditated, for the purpose of reducing to a minimum all those things which do not bear directly on the matter in hand, and swelling to a maximum those that are concerned in the material things of medicine. In this we have left out the very bed rocks of learning: the capacity to interpret the phenomena and the power to express the findings. If the average trained laboratory worker in our country today has any weakness, it is his inability to convey his ideas, to put down what he has done, to express his results in terms clear and terse. Generally his work surpasses his words. And it is not the misfortune of the individual, but of the plan which essays to substitute scientific research for sound scholarship; to get the one without the other, when we may have both. It is the common failing of the later generation of medical men that they do not write so lucidly or think so accurately as those just before them. There are, of course, numerous and notable exceptions. But the observation is probably correct, and its explanation lies in the small stress placed on actual scholarship required of one entering the profession of medicine....

Character

Detracting not one whit from the appeal for better mental equipment, it appears even more timely to emphasize the greater need for moral qualification in the physician. By this no reference is meant to righteousness or to worlds to come, to religion or to denominationalism, but only to the possession of a sound moral sense. The character of a physician is his most priceless property. It is what he stands for and whom he stands with; it is his attitude toward life; it is “what God sees him do in the dark.” Truth is the goal; it develops character, and character tells in one’s work. Too many are entering the medical profession without good working consciences, without a keen appreciation of the difference between right and wrong; too many are coming into an honored and honorable calling with low standards of trade and traffic in their souls; too many get in who are not gentlemen to begin with and cannot be made gentlemen to end with. Today the young physician too frequently feels compelled to ask his associates, “What do I get out of it?” when he might better ask himself, “What am I putting into it?” Greatly to be desired is a stronger effort to train the moral perception of medical students. They must be inspired toward a high-minded estate. In the speech and bearing of graduates of certain medical schools there is no reference is meant to righteousness or to worlds to come, but ideals and truth-loving can shine through both precept and example. Morals cannot be legislated into people; but ideals can be educated into them....


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