

Professionalism: Freshmen, 2003

It is a pleasure to give your first lecture as a medical student. It is supposed to be about professionalism. This is an enormous subject, but to me translates into virtues and conduct. We are all sensitive about speaking on such issues. We all fall short of ever being virtuous. We fail to live up to our own standards so commonly that we all are reluctant to try to instruct others. Your speaker is acutely aware of his deficiencies. So please accept the humility with which I make these comments.

First I want to point out how privileged you are to be in medical school. There are approximately 17,000 of you beginning your career in medicine at this time in the USA, drawn from a population of 280 million citizens, or about 1 in every 17,000 people. Not that you have not earned the opportunity, but still you are a privileged group. Secondly, although the financial cost to you may seem excessive, it represents less than 10% of the actual cost of your education.

There are 125 classes gathering around the country about now. These classes gathering at places like Johns Hopkins, Harvard, UCLA, Michigan, etc. are just like you. You are all starting even. They are no brighter. They are no better. Don't make the mistake of thinking that others are somehow ten feet tall and that you are not supposed to be as capable as they, because they aren't and you are. Further, your educational opportunities are just as good. Many other schools are older, many are bigger, but the opportunities to learn are not greater. You are about to be emersed in a sea of information. It is everywhere around you. You cannot turn around without bumping into important information. I advise you to be like a sponge. Don't try to evaluate the quality of the information, just acquire it. Learn all of it that you can. All you need to do is apply yourself as best you can. But, it does take work and discipline. Don't think it is better or easier somewhere else. It is not, and I know that is a fact.

Today you step into an uninterrupted line of good and sometimes great human beings that stretches backward for over 5,000 years. These intellectual forefathers of yours spent their lives in the care of the sick and the study of disease. They have earned for you great respect from your fellow man through their service, devotion, and good works. This respect, this mantle if you will, will fall unearned upon your shoulders. As a member of The Profession you automatically are accorded great respect from society. You are assumed to be a scholar, you are assumed to be trustworthy; you are assumed to be dependable. People put their lives in your hands with great confidence. You don't earn it. You inherit it.

It is a heavy burden. To me the heaviest burden in medicine is to live up to the trust people have in you. Give some examples here.

So far I have only told you about privilege and responsibility. What are the virtues, the essence of professionalism?

Clearly, there is no final authority in such matters. Many, many people have struggled with these issues. Of course we know of the seven cardinal virtues: prudence, temperance, fortitude, justice, faith, hope, and charity. They are counterpointed by the seven deadly sins: pride, avarice, envy, wrath, lust, gluttony, and sloth. These are considered Christian issues, but I think of them as Jesuit principles.

Some who have tried to categorize the principles of professionalism talk about altruism, accountability, excellence, duty, honor, integrity, fidelity, and respect for others. These are some heavy words, but I will spend the rest of my time outlining my own sense of professional virtues. Since everyone else seems to have seven, so will I.

Integrity: First of all there is integrity. Necessary in all walks of life, but is the cornerstone of Medicine. For me, it includes honesty, duty, and honor, fidelity, and several other virtues. If your colleagues and your patients cannot depend upon you, you are simply nonfunctional. Further, a physician

without integrity has a license to steal. A physician without integrity is dangerous. If you have not integrity you have nothing.

Excellence: One might use the word competence. Of all the people in the world who are compelled to seek excellence, physicians lead the vanguard. Learning in medicine is a lifetime process. It must be followed every day. You will probably find that you double your database every year for the next 8-10 years. It is like the search for The Holy Grail. You will search for perfection all your life and never find it. Perhaps you will learn that happiness lies in the striving. It lies in the effort, not in the success of the search.

Reliability: Perhaps a part of integrity, but I think not entirely. It means that you can be depended upon to do what you say you will do, when you say you will do it, and you will do it always. Included in this is the sanctity of the Dr.- Patient contract. Every time you accept a patient you have an unwritten contract. You contract to do the very best you can to solve his/her problem. This means you will stand by that patient until you have completed that contract. That contract does not include The State; it does not include the insurance company; it does not include public health policy; it does not include the family. It is between you and the patient. You are to do the best you can for that patient. Example: multiple transplants.

Morality: I think morality means to live in accord with the mores and folkways of your culture. This takes some explanation. I do not mean to slavishly follow social rules or religious rules. I mean to say that you should follow the great virtues. In every culture and in every religion courage is preferred to cowardice, wisdom over foolishness, temperance to gluttony, loyalty to disloyalty. This could go on and on, but you know what are the right things to do. You know what is honorable and what is not. The problem

is not in knowing it is in the doing. Physicians are called to a higher standard. It is intrinsic to what we do.

Behavior: This virtue may be somewhat sophistic, but as respected leaders in society, many people will observe your behavior and tend to imitate it. Thus, it is prudent to set a good example. It allows you to attempt to live-up to your heritage.

Leadership: This is another social imperative based upon your position in society. As some of the best educated, as one who really knows about people, we have a responsibility to represent our profession well. We need to participate in government, in community affairs, etc.

Philosophy: We should all study humanity in the broadest sense, in order to perform our role well. Every physician needs to be a philosopher.

As I have expressed earlier, I am uncomfortable in trying to give this material. It seems presumptuous. Most such stuff is just stuff. In the textbook recommended to you titled Fundamentals of Clinical Medicine, chapters 4 and 5 attempt to approach these principles by case presentations and discussion. Some of them are well done, and I recommend them to you. Nevertheless, think about it. I close with commending to you an observation that most of the wisdom of mankind has been reduced to aphorisms. I enjoy aphorisms, particularly trite aphorisms.

Hippocrates, the father of western medicine, collected aphorisms. One, which I commend to you, is as follows:

THE ART IS LONG, AND LIFE IS SHORT

THE CRISIS IS FLEETING, EXPERIENCE IS DECEIVING, AND JUDGEMENT IS DIFFICULT.

Perhaps it can all be simplified to the aphorism of the old testament prophet who said: WHAT IS EXPECTED OF MAN EXCEPT THAT HE LIVE JUSTLY, LOVE MERCY, AND WALK HUMBLY IN THE PRESENCE OF HIS GOD.

No one can promise you happiness, no one can promise success. But, I can promise you that if you do the best you can in this great Profession you will end your life with your own self respect and that of your fellows. I hope you will get as much from it as I have over this past half century.