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Duties and Responsibilities of a Doctor

Dr. H. H. R. Samarasinghe

I thank Professor Mohan De Silva, Dean Faculty of Medical Sciences and the other members of the Faculty of Medical Sciences of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura for inviting me to be the chief guest for the Medical Faculty Convocation 2013 and for requesting me to deliver the convocation speech.

My association with this university and the Faculty of Medical Sciences dates back to early 1993 when the Vice Chancellor then, Professor Hettiarachchi and the Vice Chancellor who succeeded him, Dr. Dorekumbura and I took the initial steps to establish this faculty.

Today is a day of recognition of the achievement of success of you as graduates from this university which has a long and distinguished heritage and in Buddhism in particular. Therefore you should hold with great pride and distinction this degree you have obtained from this prestigious university. This is a faculty that could boast with pride for having produced nearly 2000 medical graduates of whom over 200 have postgraduate specialist degrees in a relatively short period of about two decades. This speaks volumes for the hard work and dedication of all of your faculty members whose tireless, yeoman service has produced such results. Each medical graduate with his or her healing hands has cured or comforted thousands of people in our country. What unadulterated merit they and their teachers would have accumulated over the years and in many more years to come.

I trust that all of you will remember today as a momentous occasion in your lives.

Your success has come as a result of tremendous personal sacrifice, perseverance and dedication. The alternative to all this hard work of well over four years in the most productive and enjoyable years of one's life to become a doctor, could have been employment in the teaching profession or the banking sector or as a clerk in a government department. But how many are fortunate to have this special privilege to attempt to comfort or heal a fellow human being in distress? You are the chosen few. "Either a king or a healer".

Today also marks a special occasion for your family. Your parents have made many sacrifices. Some may have spent their life savings so that you could follow this medical course. Some may have even borrowed or mortgaged their possessions to help you to achieve your goals and dreams. There may be some without both parents or with a single parent. Some may label your achievement as a pyrrhic victory. Pyrrhus, a Greek hero and King of Epirus, defeated the Romans in 279 BC, losing all his Army and many men. Therefore it is a very costly victory, won at a heavy price. Still, I can guarantee you that your achievement is worthwhile.

You must of course not forget that all the university education you received is entirely free. How is this achieved? The funds for education, free education and free healthcare are from the taxes both direct and indirect, collected by the state. Even the poorest of the poor makes a contribution. So you young people must not forget your obligation to the public of this country. Some who for varying reasons are critical of the medical profession make references to the free education we have received, forgetting sometimes conveniently, that there are many others including teachers, who have been the beneficiaries of free education and not exclusively medical graduates.

We must also remember with gratitude the late C.W.W. Kannangara who introduced free education from kindergarten to the completion of university education. At one stage some cynics pointed out that free education was the biggest piece of fraud ever perpetrated before a gullible public. This of course is furthest from the truth, although even the poorest parent often has to struggle to contribute regularly for the maintenance of the school such as electricity, desks and chairs and sports activities. Well, no system is perfect however noble the intentions are. As a result of these inadequacies and because of poverty some may be unable to pursue higher medical studies and as Gray's Elegy stated, "Full many a flower is born to blush unseen and waste its sweetness in the desert air".

You will meet fresh challenges now as you step into the wide world. You contemplate whether to pursue higher studies or to study or work overseas and marriage and many other opportunities. These decisions must be made with very careful thought and consideration. You must of course continue with the close friendships you have already cultivated and with new friends you will meet. One must attempt to associate with those who are as clever as or cleverer than oneself. "The friends thou hast and their adoption tried, grapple them to thy soul with hoops of steel", as stated by Polonius to his son in Shakespeare's Hamlet. Polonius's other advice too is apt today, "Give every man thine ear but few thine voice; take each man's censure, but reserve thy judgment. Costly thy habit as thy purse can buy, but not expressed in fancy rich nor gaudy; for the apparel oft proclaim the man Neither a borrower or a lender be for a loan off loses both itself and friends. This above all to thine own self be true; And it must follow as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man"

You are entering a world that is rapidly expanding in communications, knowledge and services available. What seemed to be Science Fiction 25 years ago is now a reality. You obviously will need to keep abreast of these developments lest you will be left behind.

You are now entering a noble profession that has lasted as long as man existed. You are dealing with human beings and human beings seeking help. Whatever strata of people you meet belong to, the most humble to the mighty, treat all as human beings. They are seeking your advice and help. Please treat all of them with dignity and kindness. Humility on your part is not a sign of weakness when dealing with the sick. They all need your care, sympathy, understanding and compassion. Please give all your patients a hearing and demonstrate your willingness to help them. They come to a doctor at their moment of weakness. Please treat them all with a kind word.

The type of medicine that you will be practicing is western allopathic medicine- western medicine which originated in Ancient Greece about 460 years BC. Its scientific advancement centres in the figure of Hippocrates (460-370 BC). He gave Greek Medicine it's scientific spirit and ethical ideas. His eminence is threefold. He disassociated medicine from theurgy or the art of miracles by supernatural means and also from philosophy. He crystallised loose knowledge into systemic science and gave physicians the highest moral inspiration. He described Malaria including malignant Malaria with Haemoglobinuria, and also tuberculosis, diarrhoeas, epilepsy, paratitit, melancholia and mania. He founded the bedside method of diagnosing and treatment and has been the distinctive talent of all true clinicians from Sydenham and Heberdenn to Charcot and Osler. There is also in the surgical writings of Hippocrates accounts on fractures, dislocations and wounds of the head. In therapeutics, he believes simply in assisting nature, and although he was aware of the use of many drugs, his scheme of treatment was usually confined to such plain expedients as fresh air, good diet, purgation, bloodletting and administration of barleygruel and honey and water, honey and vinegar massage and hydrotherapy. After the destruction of Corinth in 146 BC, Greek Medicine migrated to Rome.

The ancient period closes with the name of the greatest physician after Hippocrates, Galen (131-201 AD), the founder of experimental physiology. He was the most skilled practitioner of his time. He practiced polypharmacy. he was the first and foremost contributor to experimental physiology before William Harvey and the first experimental Neurologist. He was the first to describe the cranial nerves and the sympathetic system. He made experimental sections of the spinal cord, producing hemiplegia; he produced aphonia by cutting the recurrent laryngeal nerve and gave the first valid explanation of the mechanism of respiration. He showed that arteries contained blood and demonstrated the motor power of the heart by showing that the blood pulsates between the heart and a ligated artery. He published many volumes on experimental medicine. The oldest historic face of medicine known to us is that of ancient Egypt, perhaps longer than 2500 BC. Others such as medicine of ancient Babylon under the Hammurabi, its king. From the code of Hammurabi (2250 BC) we learn that the medical profession in Babylon had advanced far enough in public esteem to be rewarded with adequate fees carefully prescribed by law. In the earliest Sanskrit documents such as the Rig Veda (1500 BC) there was a belief that supernatural forces cause illnesses. However, the ancient Hindus excelled all other nations of that time in operative surgery. During King Asoka's time (about 220 BC) rock inscriptions record the existence of hospitals and ancient Sri Lanka too boasts of hospitals as early as 437 BC. Earliest historical records of Chinese medicine begin in 1123 BC, the period of Lao Tse and Confucius.

There is no doubt that all these ancient forms of medicine had a profound influence on Greek medicine, long before Hippocrates. Greek Mythology describes Apollo as the chief God of healing. Aesculapius was the son of Apollo and he is best remembered by the staff of Aesculapius, with the entwined snake. Among the legendary children of Aesculapius were his daughters Hygiea and Panacea, who assisted in temple rights and fed the snakes.

Modern scientific medicine would recall Sir William Harvey the first to describe the circulation of blood. A good clinician is often remembered as a blend of the art of Sydenham and the science of Harvey.

The Hippocratic Oath is an ethical code attributed to Hippocrates. It is adopted as a guide to conduct by the medical profession throughout the ages and is still used in the graduation ceremonies in many medical schools, particularly in Europe and North America. It is an oath to uphold a high ethical standard in medical practice and an indenture in which the candidate agrees to share his livelihood with his teacher, to help him financially when necessary and to treat his children as his brothers and to teach the science if they desire without a fee. The sentence preventing the use of a pessary to cause abortion and of not using the knife in stone are noteworthy. Also highlighted is the non-divulging of information about patients or patient confidentiality. This of course is the corner stone of the doctor-patient relationship.

Deprecation by one doctor of the skill, knowledge, qualification or services of another doctor is not admissible. However, if there is obvious medical incompetence of a colleague it should be brought to the notice of the relevant licensing authorities.

Advertising is anathema to the medical profession. Particular care needs to be observed with regard to appearances on television and in writing medical articles in the lay press. There are also restrictions with regard to name boards and other forms of advertising.

Relationships with the pharmaceutical industry too need attention. This is particularly so with regards to incentives such as attendance of meetings overseas. It is best if these pharmaceutical companies deal with medical associations and professional bodies rather than with individuals when awarding overseas trips to doctors.

Fees charged by doctors should be reasonable and in the case of surgical operations it would be prudent if the surgeon discusses the fee with the patient and his immediate family prior to the surgery. There is no need for doctors to chase after money as nearly all in the medical profession are financially stable.

Good doctors make the care of their patients their first concern. They are competent, keep their knowledge and skills up to date, establish and maintain good relationships with patients and colleagues, are honest and trustworthy and act all times with integrity. Continues professional development in the form of continued learning and assessment in the form of regular peer review is recommended. You obviously must recognise the limits of your own professional competence and seek the help of colleagues for the care and wellbeing of your patients. The rights of patients to be fully involved in decisions about their care must be respected.

In Sri Lanka up to now, euthanasia or mercy killing whether active, assisted or passive, is illegal and this includes withdrawal of life support or notices station "DO NOT RESUSCITATE".

All doctors should realise that the primary objective of the medical profession is to render service to humanity; reward or financial gain is a subordinate consideration. In carrying out this noble service, one should conduct oneself with proprietary, remain modest, sober, kind and patient at all times.

Doctors should merit the confidence of patients in their care, rendering to each a full measure of service and devotion in keeping with the dignity to which every human being is entitled.

It is essential that doctors have a nurse or chaperone, especially when examining patients of the opposite sex. Following this simple principle will avoid embarrassment to both the doctor and the patient. Treating female patients with the same care and dignity as treating one's mother would prevent many unnecessary problems.

The practitioner should use methods of healings founded on a scientific basis. The honoured ideals of the medical profession imply that the responsibilities of the doctor extend not only to individuals but also to society itself.

Sir William Osler was a physician of great repute and had been a professor of medicine at McGill University in Canada, University of Pennsylvania, John Hopkins University in Baltimore, Maryland and the University of Oxford. He has been described as a role model for clinicians and I would recommend you to read his book "Aequanimitas".

I conclude this address by reading to you the poem "If" written by a former Professor of Medicine and a former teacher of mine from a bygone era. At his feet we learnt bedside clinical medicine at a time when sophisticated laboratory and radiological investigations and imaging techniques were nonexistent. This teacher inspired many generation of doctors to show concern and compassion to patients irrespective of their financial status.

IF — By Professor K. Rajasuriya

(With apologies to Rudyard Kipling)

If you can bear in mind that you are dealing,
 With human life and not with 'cases' pray,
 If you can treat them without discriminating
 Whether they are labeled 'pauper' or 'to pay':

If you can rush with equal alacrity
 To see a case that needs attention start
 If it's no matter there's no 'buckshee' in it
 Yet, if offered, you can refuse it flat:

If you can smile cheer up the ailing,
 Or by a touch, relieve the suffering pain,
 If you can by a word, console the dying
 Who'll never taste this earth's tortures again:

If you can force your heart and nerve sinew
To work overtime for those who need your skill:
If all that counts is just the joy of serving
And it matters not what happens to the bill:

If you can wait but not be tired of waiting
For the fame that one day perhaps you'll earn
Cheap notoriety the while disdain,ing,
Nor rush to print 'cos there's much more to learn:

If you can leave the trick of advertisement
To those who made it a crooked art;
Knowing it's but a quack's one accomplishment,
Of honest men it never forms a part;

If you can talk with touts and keep your virtue,
And treat Big Bugs, not with the poor lose touch:
If neither wealth nor fame can yet corrupt you,
All beings count with you, but none too much:

If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds of work well done;
You'll then have reached a noble profession's summit,
And what is more, you'll die content, my son.

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