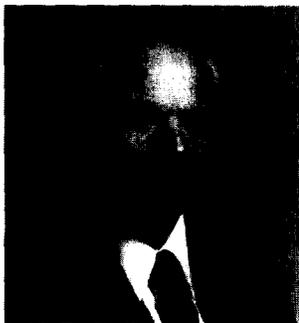


EDITOR'S PAGE



How Much Is a Physician Worth?

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When I began my tenure as Editor-in-Chief of the Journal, I made a conscious decision not to publish comments on my Editor's Pages. First of all, space is at a premium, and second, it would only be self-serving to publish favorable comments. However, my Editor's Page in the July issue evoked considerable reaction to "The Root of All Evil" (1) as a discussion of physician compensation. Some of the comments were:

Your latest editorial . . . was right on the money, so to speak. I have often said to my fellows that if you have to work for a living, the only thing that is really important is to enjoy coming to work in the morning.

The writings of Sir William Osler have undergone a considerable amount of attempted demythologizing Perhaps one reason is the discomfort that some high earning physicians would feel when reading Osler's admonitions to be aware of the successful practice. In discussion with my colleague(s), we agree that the potential for a very high income increases the risk of losing a sense of the sacred in medicine.

The loss of money is not the main issue in the cardiology revolution any more than taxation was the main issue in the American Revolution.

The letter that really prompted me to publish these comments, however, was received from Dr. J. Willis Hurst. I believe that it summarizes professionalism and the worth of a physician as well as anything I have ever read. I hope it lifts you as much as it did me and all of the Associate Editors at *JACC*.

As Professor and Chairman of the Department of Medicine at Emory University School of Medicine for 30 years (1957-1986) I felt the responsibility for defining a *professional person*. The answer was supplied to me by Elbert Tuttle, the famous civil rights judge. He passed the following definition on to those who attended the summer graduation exercises at Emory in 1957 (2):

"The professional man is in essence one who provides services. But the service he renders is something more than that of the laborer, even the skilled laborer. It is a service that wells up from the entire complex of his personality. True, some specialized and highly developed techniques may be included, but their mode of expression is given its deepest meaning by the personality of the practitioner. In a very real sense his professional service cannot be separate from his personal being. He has no goods to sell, no land to till; his only asset is himself. It turns out that there is no right price for service, for what is a share of a man worth? If he does not contain the quality of integrity, he is worthless. If he does, he is priceless. The value is either nothing or it is infinite.

So do not try to set a price on yourselves. Do not measure out your professional services on an apothecary's scale and say, 'Only this for so much.' Do not debase yourselves by equating your souls to what they will bring in the market. Do not be a miser, hoarding your talents and abilities and knowledge, either among yourselves or in your dealings with your clients, patients, or flock. Rather be reckless and spendthrift, pouring out your talent to all to whom it can be of service! Throw it away, waste it; and in the spending it can be of service. Do not keep a watchful eye lest you slip, and give away a little bit of what you might have sold. Do not censor your thoughts to gain a wider audience. Like love, talent is useful only in its expenditure, and it is never exhausted. Certain it is that man must eat, so set what price you must on your service. But never confuse the performance, which is great, with the compensation, be it money, power or fame, which is trivial."

Over the years I have, with Judge Tuttle's permission, repeated his definition of professionalism to everyone who would listen and have reproduced it in many of my own publications. Judge Tuttle died recently at the age of 99. He worked and lived by his definition of professionalism until the end of his life. In the midst of our current turmoil it is essential—we must not lose sight of professionalism. If we do, we will have lost the battle.

References

1. Parmley WW. The root of all evil. *J Am Coll Cardiol* 1996;28:258-9.
2. Tuttle EP Sr. Heroism in war and peace. *Emory Univ Q* 1957;13:129-30.

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