

THE NEW GRADUATE AND "MEDICARE"

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As new graduates, you will receive much unsolicited advice, most of which you will quietly - and wisely - disregard. I would not have added to this spate of cautionary or persuasive words, if I had not been urged to do so by your Editor.

You are now being warned by the prophets of doom inside and outside our profession that you are entering Medicine "at a crucial time". A government-financed system of medical practice faces you, they say, with untold potential dangers, disappointments and disillusionment. I was told exactly the same thing in 1938 by the pundits of that day! They were no less certain of their dire predictions than their present day descendants. But the last thirty years have seen more progress in Medicine than occurred in the whole of preceding history. I believe that you will see even more rapid advances during your medical careers.

True, it now seems certain that a system of publicly financed medical insurance services will be introduced soon. Furthermore, it is known that it will be a plan covering the whole population, and not a voluntary one providing government assistance for those who need it, as recommended by the Canadian Medical Association. Although I have been one of the more outspoken critics of this tax-supported mass programme and a supporter of the C.M.A. plan, I do not believe that the government-financed programme will lead inevitably to deterioration in the quality of medical services. It *need* not do so if the new graduates and the younger practitioners lend a hand in shaping the plan. It is your duty as citizens and as members of a great profession to see that a practical system is worked out that will allow you to serve your patients well.

How can this be achieved?

I suggest that you consider first your duties and responsibilities as a good citizen, secondly your duties and responsibilities as a member of the medical profession, and thirdly your own personal stake in the matter, in that order. I suggest, moreover, that if you look after the first two, as a citizen and professional man, the third, your own interest, will be amply protected. On the other hand, if I thought that self-interest would come first with most of you, I would be less optimistic about the future of the insurance plan, the quality of medical services, and particularly the freedom of the medical profession. Nothing will hasten government regulation of medical practice more certainly than the abuse of a public insurance plan by a selfish minority and nothing would be more stultifying than a rigid system of government control.

Some would have us believe that our major threat is from government, that we must protect ourselves from the machinations of vote-hungry politicians who will place the immediate attraction of public popularity before a high quality of medical service. You must certainly exercise the utmost vigilance to forestall this threat, but you must take equal care to perform drastic surgery at the first sign of a developing malignancy in the body medical.

Some of us tend to become very cynical about the motives of politicians, and they give us ample reason. The recent distasteful display of Conservative and NDP members competing with each other in their efforts to add a few more plums - chiropractic, optometric and pharmaceutical - to the already over-bloated Liberal Medicare pie would seem to confirm our most cynical views. Nevertheless, although politicians will, no doubt, all rush to join the give-away act and will continue to increase the services which they believe the public demands, most of them will

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at the same time want these services to be good.

In spite of a certain degree of cynicism about the purchase of votes with the voters' own tax money, I firmly believe that most politicians in Canada, and certainly in Nova Scotia, are honestly seeking a sound solution to the problem of providing medical and other health services in a manner that will ensure a high quality of patient care. You will sometimes have to guard your rights as doctors against the occasional vote-greedy politician, but your best protection surely lies in providing sound, well-reasoned and unselfish advice to the great majority of honest politicians, as they try to solve this very complex problem for the welfare of the public. Most of them recognize quite as clearly as you do that the public good will not be served for long by any medical insurance plan unless the high quality of medical care is maintained. However, they do not always understand how this quality may be threatened. You must also have a very clear view of the matter or your advice to them will not be of much value.

As a medical doctor, you have the opportunity to be one of the most influential members of your community. You will remain in this enviable position only so long as you display a true interest in the community's welfare and do not give the impression of being only a self-seeking individualist. You can help maintain the quality of medical services in the future only if you are prepared, as a good citizen, to aid and advise your elected representatives in government. If you "leave it to the politicians", do not blame them later if the medicare product is an inferior one.

Your best approach is through your medical society. My advice is for you to join immediately and vigorously in the life and activities of the medical organizations of your hospital, county and province, and take some of your tightly rationed time to inform yourself of the current issues. Medical organizations are democratic bodies and they act on the advice and decisions of the members. The silent spectator, who never makes known his views on any problem, but grumbles later in the corridors of the

hospital, is useless to any medical organization.

Fortunately, the great majority of the medical profession in Canada has always put the high quality of service to their patients first, but many have felt that the job was done when they kept their own level of practice up-to-date. The work of "organized medicine" was left to the few. This has an inherent danger. Every organization has a few vocal members who are sure that their own personal welfare should be the primary criterion on which the action of the whole organization should be based. Just as you may occasionally have to protect yourself against the politician-in-government, who puts quantity of votes before quality of medical service, you will have to guard your moral principles against the few politicians-in-medicine who will put the amount of earnings before the quality of medical service. Both types of politicians will, of course, assure you with great earnestness that their intentions are of the highest order and their goals are completely unselfish.

Moreover, I think the profession will have to take more positive action to maintain the quality of medical service. You will have to put your own professional practice under the scrutiny of your confrères and participate in evaluating theirs, even though the decisions may be difficult and sometimes unpleasant.

If the medical profession maintains a balanced outlook on the problems of Medicare, I believe that neither the politicians-in-government nor the politicians-in-medicine are likely to submerge the profession in mediocrity and materialism, either in my lifetime or in yours. But a selfish, grasping attitude on the part of individuals or groups will invite more and more government interference and red tape. The price of a free profession is self-discipline. And more than ever today this means a well-educated and well-motivated profession that is prepared to work hard for its ideals.

Don't expect *George* to do it for you. *George* may turn out to be a government bureaucrat.