Letter from Mumbai

NATIONAL CONSULTATION FOR PROFESSIONALISM IN HEALTH PROFESSION EDUCATION

When Dr Himanshu Pandya (unfortunately not related to me!), Professor of Medicine, Pramukhswami Medical College, Karamsad, Gujarat invited me to participate in this Consultation during 1–3 April 2013, I was in a dilemma. I retired from my position in a teaching hospital in 1998 and have no connection with medical education since. I made my apprehension known to Dr Himanshu. I am glad I accepted the invitation at his urging.

To most Indians, Karamsad, seven kilometres west of Anand in Gujarat, recalls its most famous sons, Vallabhbhai Patel (who was given the title ‘Sardar’ by the residents of Bardoli during his leadership of their agitation) and his elder brother, Vithalbhai. Karamsad has preserved their home, which now houses many historic photographs of the two brothers. There is also a memorial to them next to the medical college. Both are well worth a visit.

The dictionary informed me that apart from the consultation that patients seek with doctors, the word refers to ‘The action or process of formally consulting or discussing.’ This was my first experience with a national consultation and I came away with admiration for the process.

Forty-three participants—some from other countries—met to discuss ways and means for ensuring professionalism in the education of doctors, nurses and other therapists who treat patients. Many definitions of professionalism were discussed. One omission was the description by Judge Elbert P. Tuttle Sr in 1957. It was given to me by the late Mr Nani Palkhivala. In turn, I hand it over to you as it encapsulates the finest attributes of a doctor:

‘Who is a professional?
‘The professional man, in essence, is one who provides service. But the service he renders is something more than that of the labourer. 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 service on an apothecary’s scale and say, “Only this for so much”. Do not debase yourselves by hoarding your talents and abilities and knowledge, either among yourselves or in your dealings with your clients, patients or flocks.

‘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 its compensation, be it money, power or fame, which is trivial.’

The consultation in Karamsad had as its aim the production of guidelines on ensuring the inculcation of professionalism in individuals during their training in healthcare. Each participant was sent a number of publications on the subject for study before travel to Karamsad. I was happy to see among those the landmark paper entitled ‘The care of the patient’ by Dr Francis W. Peabody, published in JAMA in 1927. As Dr Peabody had predicted, ‘this little lecture will be remembered long after anything of a scientific nature I have written has been forgotten’. If, somehow, you have missed this paper, please obtain a copy. You will treasure it. Also included was an account of Caraka’s thoughts and practices on the training of his disciples. Entitled ‘Learning to be a physician’, it forms chapter 10 in Dr M.S. Valiathan’s book The legacy of Caraka. (Due to an oversight, the source of the reprint on Caraka’s thoughts and practices was not provided by the organizers.)

The format of the consultation was simple. The participants (including Dr Utpala Kharod, dean of the college and five selected students and postgraduates of the medical college) were divided into five groups. Four major topics had been defined: (i) the meaning of professionalism; (ii) the development of faculty that was competent to teach professionalism; (iii) effective methods for teaching professionalism; and finally (iv) the assessment of the acquisition of professionalism by students.

I understand that Dr Himanshu and his colleagues at the medical college were guided by some of the foreign participants, especially Dr William Burdick of Philadelphia, when planning this event. There was thus understandable bias towards western methods and experiences.

Dr Burdick started off the proceedings by getting the participants to know one another. He used an admirable technique that quickly broke the ice. He asked each participant to turn to the adjacent person to make pairs. Each member was given three minutes to interview the partner. At the end of six minutes, pair by pair, each participant was expected to introduce the other member of the pair by name, teaching responsibility and describing one non-professional interest. I had the privilege of introducing Dr Matthijs Cornelissen, Director of the Indian Psychology Institute in Puducherry.

Most sessions started off with a keynote address describing what was expected on the topic. The groups were then housed in eight different rooms for discussion. The summary points of the consensus arrived at by each group were discussed in the general body and a final set of guidelines derived. At the end of the three days, there was a body of guidelines based on these discussions. Adherence to the timings laid down made some discussions somewhat hurried but on the whole, the discipline paid off and long-windedness was avoided.

In the light of Judge Tuttle’s description above, the inclusion, in the guidelines, of Indian criteria was admirable—dharma, satya, prema, karuna and shanti. (Should you be interested in obtaining a copy of these guidelines, please contact Dr Himanshu...
There were two added bonuses for the participants. One evening was devoted to performances on the stage by students and staff of the medical college. It was exhilarating to see the talent on display. Some classical dances by students and songs by students, professors and Dean Dr Kharod have left indelible memories. On another evening, the film Wit was screened to demonstrate lack of professionalism as displayed by the doctors treating the dying Dr Vivian Bearing PhD, Professor of English Literature (played by Emma Thompson). The film made for American television in 2001 is also worth seeing for the empathy displayed by Dr Bearing’s nurse, Susie Monahan (played by Audra McDonald). This film must form part of the curriculum on the inculcation of humanism in every medical student. It was awarded the Peabody award—named after George Foster Peabody—an investment banker.

ON RESEARCH, LIBRARIES AND LIBRARIANS


‘I believe that the biggest problem facing scientific research in Egypt is not religious dogma or lack of funds or a paltry budget for scientific research, as much as it is the tight grip of security agencies that killed our cultural and educational institutions, whether universities, libraries or museums. This is coupled with a conservative, backward mentality of those in charge of these facilities.

‘To give you a clearer picture, I share here some of what I and many of my students have been suffering from while trying to conduct scientific research in our field, history.

‘When I began preparing my doctoral thesis at Oxford University about Egypt’s history under the reign of Mohamed Ali, my adviser, Roger Owen, suggested I go to the British National Archives, which was then called the Public Record Office (PRO), that houses reports … which are considered an indispensable source for anyone studying that period…

‘I finally mustered my courage and decided to … ask about the process of obtaining a permit for access. A staff member met me at the reception desk and asked for my ID. As I only had a university student ID, she photocopied it then began filling some forms and asked me to sit down and look into a camera in front of me. A few minutes later, she gave me a permit and informed me apologetically that the permit was valid for “only” three years.

‘Stunned at the ease with which I was inducted into that bastion of historical knowledge, I went in and it would not be an exaggeration to say that I came out a different person for I had my first taste of historical research, something that I still deeply cherish and treasure.

‘After spending six months at this amazing institution, it was time to return to Egypt to begin dissertation research in earnest … I went to the National Archives to consult the letters of Mohamed Ali to his son and commander in chief of his army, Ibrahim Pasha.

‘At the archives, I was overwhelmed by the amount of forms, official stamps and letters of introduction the staff member there asked of me. After I gave them everything they asked for, they asked me to return several weeks later without being more specific. I found out later that access to historic records at the National Archives requires a security screening of my topic and my person. And like everything else that has to do with the notorious “amm”, i.e. security, no one could really guess how long it would take for a permit to be issued…

‘The state of the National Archives is similar to all our research facilities, including universities, libraries and museums. These institutions are mostly obsessed with the security, not research. The success of any official at these institutions is measured by his or her success at protecting and safeguarding the contents, not attracting researchers and transforming the facility into a place for generating knowledge.

‘This obsession with security matters, coupled with a conservative mindset that is suspicious of researchers, is not only a sign of the cultural backwardness we are suffering from but also a key cause of it. If ever this nation is to see a revival of the arts and science, we must work hard to defeat this security mentality.’

‘My own experience tallies with that of Dr Fahmy. I have met with disarming courtesy, promptness and efficiency at such institutions as the Wellcome Library and the British Library, both on Euston Road, London, England and at the U.S. National Library of the History of Medicine in Bethesda, Maryland. In each of these institutions, getting a photo-identity card and the freedom to explore their collections took less than five minutes despite the fact that I was an Indian citizen and a tourist.

Alas! Experience in India is no different from that in Egypt as anyone who has attempted accessing the treasures housed in our national and state archives will attest. There is also a difference in attitudes of those in charge of these stores of information. Librarians and officials elsewhere are sympathetic to anyone in quest of knowledge and wisdom and go out of their way to help, especially if one is from a foreign country. Here, the official, often chewing pan and reading the daily newspaper while sipping his cup of tea, looks upon the seeker as a most unwelcome disturbance of his tranquility and thus a nuisance to be got rid of as soon as possible.

SUNIL K. PANDYA