

DOCTORS AS INTELLECTUALS

The medical profession is arguably the most respected profession, and has been so for centuries. It is seen by the general public as one which can be trusted with the most intimate problems, individual or family, medical or social.

It has also been the case that, particularly in the past, doctors have spread their wings beyond the limits of medical practice and have been involved in politics, literature and various aspects of Maltese culture.

It is true that medical practitioners are considered to be very busy with work within their speciality and have little time or inclination to widen their interests to reach out to the general public. One might also expect that any intellectual input should come primarily from the academic members rather from those involved in the day-to-day work at the coalface.

There is, however, a great need for medical practitioners to become more visible within the framework of society, not just as dispensers of medical advice and medication, but also to become involved in issues of public concern.

One issue of concern is the obvious lack of medical (or even basic biological knowledge) within the community. Science in general, but particularly medical science seems to be at a nadir, neglected to a large extent in schools, and evident not only in the illiterate but even in many of those practicing other professions. In this respect it is encouraging to see medical students writing about medical matters in the local papers. This is certainly an area where most medical practitioners can be involved, whether in print, radio, television, or the more recently introduced social media which seem to include everybody these days.

Perhaps more worrying are the current changing mores relating to ethical issues. Time was when most of us got our ethical substratum from teaching by the church which used to be so predominant in influencing ethical thinking within society. These days, for better or worse, the influence of the church has diminished very considerably, particularly among the younger members of society, leaving a gaping void.



GUEST EDITORIAL



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Everyone seems entitled to express their considered but untutored views on any topic. I believe that the medical profession should be at the forefront in informing the public about ethical issues relating to the many aspects of medical and social problems.

Perhaps related to this is the lack of familiarity with basic issues inherent in an education in the humanities, with its emphasis on elucidation of basic ethical and social issues within the community.

Maybe members of the medical profession may feel diffident in discussing issues which are not strictly and narrowly medical. While medical education is the most essential requisite, it should serve as a springboard to launch into wider societal issues. Who else, professional social workers apart, would be more familiar with the widespread issues which many practitioners face every day, issues such as the effects of poverty, domestic violence, child abuse, old age, single motherhood, reproductive technology, and a raft of other societal issues?

Various definitions of 'intellectual' have been proposed. A trivial dictionary definition, 'a person possessing a highly developed intellect' is obvious enough but this is just a minimum requirement. It is more important to emphasize the role of such individuals in spreading their knowledge and expertise to the general community, and not merely within the coterie of colleagues and related experts.

We can all be intellectuals if we use our special knowledge to engage with the public to tackle a wide range of educational and social issues. As that wise philosopher/statesman Edmund Burke remarked: *"All that is needed for the forces of evil to succeed is for enough good men to remain silent."* ❄️