

SPEECH DELIVERED BY H.E. PROF. GUIDO DE MARCO, PRESIDENT OF MALTA, AT THE OPENING OF THE 6TH MEDITERRANEAN MEDICAL CONFERENCE AT MDINA, 7TH SEPTEMBER 2000

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Medicine, much like religion, has always had a magical mystique about it. The medical practitioner, like religious practitioner provides a bridge and helps the laymen to rationalize the unknown and reduce it into known terms. The patient, often sick and in pain, seeks the advice of the one person, the doctor, who can deliver him from the misery of suffering. In the vast majority of cases it is family doctors such as you gathered here today, whom patients first consult about their symptoms. It is at this point that the family doctors face a mayor challenge - that of communication.

In this era of globalization, communication may take on several forms: Internet, interactive television, radio..., but in dealing with clients, the family doctor has to rely on that most basic form of communication - - words. Talking to a patient, taking time out of a busy schedule is part of a process which the medical profession cannot with impunity, ignore.

By talking to the patient, the doctor is administering the first therapy, that of giving the patient importance and hence making him feel that he and his feelings count. Talking this approach needs courage and sensitivity. Courage in the face of difficult or upsetting diagnoses. Sensitivity, because in the balance between schedules, family and the patient in front of him, the doctor must always empathise with the patient to be able to give him optimum advice.

It is from this challenge to communicate effectively, that another, in my opinion more important challenge, springs. This is the challenge of demystifying medicine. Earlier, I referred to the doctor as being perceived to be a form of magician, the purveyor of health and well being when illness strikes. In the past this aura of reserved information to the initiated few was carefully preserved. It gave prestige. It gave authority, and, if one might dare acknowledge, it discouraged the patient from asking questions, which the doctor, for any amount of reasons, might not be in a position to answer. In fact, this situation led to a distinction between the haves and have-nots of knowledge. More importantly, it led to an increasing helplessness on the part of the patients who became prone to leave even the simplest issues to the doctor, or even, the consultant. Patient empowerment is a dual challenge.

It involves hard work in educating the people and spreading knowledge so that the gap between the Info-haves and the Info-have nots is substantially decreased. It involves a more professional approach by family doctors themselves. For the doctor who disseminates is one who is sure of his status, of his knowledge, of his ability to heal. No one is in a position to empower anyone else if his own power-base, in this case knowledge, is threatened.

This brings us to another point, the need of doctors to keep abreast of information and discoveries. No mean feat this, when one considers the vast amount of knowledge constantly being updated on several aspects of medicine. Several factors keep doctors from updating themselves as often and as thoroughly as they would like. Among these factors one must mention discrepancies in standards of development reached by the countries in which the doctors operate.

Mediterranean counties may resemble others geographically and climatically but they find also similarities in the problems they face. Lack of resources leads to frustration among doctors who know that they can do more but may not because the country's resources are perhaps mis-directed. In this respect Malta, has achieved much. Perhaps because of its size, its lack of resources, Malta has had to exploit to the utmost its resource to be able to give the best health care it can afford.

Malta's effort was recognized in the report published last April by the world health organization in which it placed fifth in the world as a country making the best use and providing the best care relative to the resources available to it. States must ensure that access to knowledge is not hampered because now, even more than before, the process of developing knowledge from available data makes all the difference between good and excellent treatment of the patient. Conferences of this kind also serve as an impetus for research in fresh woods and pastures new.

Doctors have the assurance of belonging to a profession but increasingly, the world is moving away from professions and more towards professionals.

This change is indicative of changing times. The family doctor must not rely only on the medications so easily prescribed. Psychological therapy

often translated into listening and explaining helps to foster serenity in the patient, laying the foundations for speedy recovery.

Patient empowerment and increasing doctor - patient communication lead to a different field of medicine - Family and Community medicine. Studies abroad have shown that more than 90% of also contacts by patients start at the level of primary care. Not only minor illnesses such as colds, but chronic illnesses such as asthma and more serious illnesses. The range of treatment which falls under the jurisdiction of the family doctor is vast and the clinical decisions made by them are critical to subsequent diagnoses and treatment. Family treatment is increasingly being recognized as a specialization in itself.

At the moment in Malta primary health care is provided both by the state and also by the private sector. Perhaps the time is approaching when this area is harmonized so that the service is optimized while leaving ample space for choice. One principle is paramount: Medicine is not a commodity available only to those who can afford it. Treatment and cure are not dependent on health insurance. The only health insurance that a patient needs lies in the fact that he is a human being wor-

thy of every respect and dignity whose life must be cherished and respected as an image and likeness of the Creator.

I want to stress an important principle: a person belonging to the profession owes his first duty to his client. Any other consideration whatever be its relevance, including financial remuneration, is subject to this basic principle.

Ladies and gentlemen

These are only few of the challenges which face the medical profession and it is up to the medical professionals like you to deal with them to the best of their abilities in their daily work. The greatest challenge however lies within each and every one of us: to be the best and to give the best without fear.

A final word, I think that the family doctor is one of the most respected persons in our community. In my personal experience, the family doctor is an advisor, a healer and always a friend, a family friend. May I take therefore this occasion to publicly thank our family doctors - our family friends.

Thank you and good work.

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