

THE CADUCEUS



The Old Man of the Mountain

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The Editorial Board

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Time: one fine Saturday morning in April

Place: Professor McFadzean's Office

... It's about a new column in the Caduceus, sir, we wish to talk to you about, sir.

... Calling me "sir" once is enough... You've paid tribute to my appointment. You don't know me... Pay respect only to those who earn it, not to the position they hold...

... Yes, sir. We plan to feature a few VIP's around, sir.

... What do you mean? ... because I am the old man of the Faculty? Age is not synonymous with either wisdom or experience.

... Personalities of your stature, sir. (must resort to the use of explicit flattery sometimes!)

... Rubbish! Few people in their life-time become of real stature... you would need to perch me on a mountain... the old man on the mountain...

... (Mountain? One can't be really sure it isn't a volcano.)

... You've heard the usual tales about me... most of them are apocryphal...

... Yes, sir, and we hope to find out the truth...

Revamp the Curriculum and No Degree Exam (for the Average Student)

... Any room for improvement in the Medical Faculty, sir?

... Of course... Reformation of a curriculum which is hopelessly outmoded and, even worse, hopelessly overloaded... Partial abolition of degree examinations...they were designed by the devil... Replacement by continuous assessment... The average student would pass and would not sit degree examinations. Students who failed would sit the degree examinations which we now know. Good students would sit examinations entirely different from that of the failures in continuous assessment. The radical reformer in this Faculty would need to acquire a machine-gun and ensure that his finger was on the trigger. It has been contended, for over 50 years, that if attempts be made to combine the educational with the vocational... failures in both objectives. We do it here to a deplorable extent. However, over the years, the system has worked well enough... The high quality of our graduates and, especially, of our past graduates are sources of great pride to me and I am sure to others...

... Wouldn't such a scheme of continuous assessment permits grounds for biased judgment and encourages favouritism, sir?

... Yes, one cannot be blind to that danger but I believe it would be offset... Difficulties may be greater in some Departments than in others.

Socrates, Slaves and Stupid Students...

... I can only speak for the Department of Medicine. Undergraduates do not receive a vocational training but there is a vocational content for the principles of medicine can be learned at the bedside, employing, as models, patients and their diseases. Basically we expect students to learn to acquire data from patients and consequently he must have the skill properly to examine patients... to reason especially... to apply, whenever possible, the knowledge gleaned in the pre-clinical and para-clinical departments ... By and large students are stupid... Instead of going to the bedside as often as possible they, slavishly, worship authority... whether it be chalk, talk or the printed word. Socrates taught that authority should be questioned, no matter in what guise it presented itself. Incidentally, in medicine, the best method of teaching is the

Socratic method... does not matter whether teacher or student assumes the role of Socrates.

... But sir, Socrates never barked at his students, did he?

... I don't bark, for barking dogs don't bite. I snarl and bite, if the snarl produces no results. You know little of Socrates ... he suffered not fools gladly...

An Increasing Crop of Mediocre Students?

... As was anticipated, a progressive increase in intake has resulted in an increase in the major mass, the average and below average students. There has been no increase in the number of good students. Occasionally we have had vintage years but such have become decidedly uncommon. Matriculation results are not necessarily reliable but at least their use is equitable and, in my view, the best yard-stick we have. Headmasters' reports, as in the United Kingdom, vary widely in reliability. Interviews have proved useless. They are far too brief to be of value and the applicants tend to say what they think the interviewers want them to say. An entrance examination is anathema to me...

Clinical Practice will be...

... Osler said, "as is a man's Pathology so is his clinical practice. It would be truer today to say 'as is a man's Biochemistry and Physiology' "... and this applies also to Pathology and Microbiology which are clinical subjects. ... A case of "the early bird catches the worm", sir?

... Yes.

"Your hair, doc."

... They say you strongly object to clinical students wearing their hair long. Yet one really see little correlation between a mere outgrowth from the cranial region and the level of academic competence. Are medical students not entitled to some measure of personal freedom, too, sir?

...As usual you see issues from but one point of view and have the temerity to judge. No, it is not a personal foible. Have you ever thought of it from the patient's point of view? In the Aphorisms of Hippocrates you will find:

“A physician shall be sober in his habit.” The word “habit” (not habits) refers to his appearance, his dress and his manner. When a student enters the clinical years and comes into contact with patients, he must abide by the long established customs of his profession. The patients in this hospital are, by and large, highly conservative. Surely you can imagine, for example, the reactions of anxious, conservative, Chinese parents with a desperately ill child were that child to be attended by a long-haired “with it” doctor clad in the modern equivalent of Jacob’s cloak of many colours. ... Outwith the wards and the Department I would never dream of interfering with a student's liberty provided he does not bring the dignity of the profession which he has chosen to enter into disrepute.

Lame Dogs over Stiles

... Which of your achievement has given you greatest pleasure, sir?

... “Siritis” seems an incurable disease in your case. I can best answer that in the words of my idol in Medicine, Patrick Manson, the Father of Medical Education in Hong Kong when asked the same question: “Helping lame dogs over stiles, but I would add, commonly such have to be grabbed by the scruff of the neck and thrown over.

