

## THE DOCTOR AND THE NURSE

*The review L'hôpital à Paris*<sup>1</sup> devoted an editorial to the professions of doctor and nurse and the obligations that they imply in the field of professional ethics. We all know the ravages caused to-day by specialization and the consequent need to recall, as is done in the text to follow, the greatness and also the demands of these two professions.

The exercise of any profession, whatever it may be, is inseparable from a certain moral standard. None can be reduced to mere routine. In every profession there must be manifest what it has become a convention to call professional conscience, a combination of qualities and virtues which are widespread in varying degrees, such as honesty and conscientiousness.

But what is the relationship of these requirements which are common to all professions and trades—garage hands, accountants, civil servants, teachers—and of these professions in particular, that of doctor and nurse, whose raw material is man; man made fragile and vulnerable by suffering and illness and a prey to fear and anxiety for self-preservation?

The human materials, the living flesh on which the doctor and the nurse work confer on their professions a singular character. Competence, knowledge, technique are necessary as in any other sphere—and even more so, since a mistake, or an awkward gesture, might have irremediable consequences. But even less than in other spheres are these qualities alone sufficient. Intelligence must be combined with imaginative feeling, technique with manner, skill with feeling, science with pity; all qualities which may be defined as the perfect and wide opening to reach others who may be feeble, helpless, passive and anxious.

Both these professions have an ambiguous aspect since they involve simultaneously the exercise of a trade and the accomplish-

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<sup>1</sup> *L'hôpital à Paris*, Paris 1969, No. 58.

ment of a vocation. Now, while the former has to be learnt and is remunerative, the latter is not taught and is not paid: the desire to acquire the necessary training is inseparable from a calling to which one feels oneself able to respond, otherwise it is a tiresome and regrettable error.

These are absorbing professions in that they simultaneously mobilize, hypothetically and by definition, all personal resources, complex and rich, both of the mind and the heart and it is impossible to give priority to some instead of to others. Can we say, for example, that the permanent refreshing of knowledge, made necessary by the rapid progress of science and technology, is more an intellectual necessity than a moral requirement, or vice-versa, since what is at stake is the possibility of giving patients the benefit of the most recent discoveries and therefore, *a priori*, the best chances of recovering their shattered health.

The two components which analysis prompted by desire for clear thinking would classify under two headings—theoretical and technical proficiency on one hand and practical application subject to human imperatives on the other—are in reality an indivisible whole. To distinguish and separate would be to disembody. One can no more imagine an ignorant doctor than one can an inhuman doctor. Medicine is knowledge, speculative competence, translated into action by moral motives. The doctor is a scientist whose science, far from eclipsing him, brings to the full that primary and essential quality humanity and—like the good samaritan in the Bible—a feeling of intense solidarity as a living force and common fate. The patient's death, inevitable as it might be, is less of a professional failure than a laceration or agony of conscience which was committed to saving the patient or at least seeing him through crisis. On a different plane, the same can be said of the nurse.

The nurse and doctor are in a position which is comparable with no other profession. Professional conscience usually means qualities which are observable, rather superficial, and which can be summarized as honesty and behaviour which is moreover convenient. But for the doctor and nurse demands are much more imperative and the daily strain is ten or a hundred times worse. Death is always strange and never ends. How can one not become accustomed to it otherwise than through willpower consciously exerted and

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ceaselessly renewed. How otherwise can one associate in the suffering of others when it must be shared to overcome it? How, without becoming weary, can one become intimate with anguish ten and twenty times a day in order to be acquainted with it and learn how to appease it? Routine, the mechanical performance of duty, is not called for. Every patient is a person with his own particular problems. Mass production methods are inconceivable; automation out of the question. The raw material is living. There is no panacea, stereotype solution or miracle prescription. Labour, fatigue, questions which one does not always have the leisure to delay are ever present.

Medicine and nursing are together highly privileged and dangerously demanding professions. To choose them, if one has the right idea of the necessary aptitudes, is already in itself the sign of possession of certain qualities of the mind and the heart.

As in any other sphere, it is not merely the choice of profession which confers superiority. The dignity and honour reside in the manner the profession is carried out day after day throughout life. This particular profession being a vocation, one must every morning hear the call repeated, take oneself in hand, rekindle perhaps not enthusiasm but fervour so that each new patient seems like the first. This is no easy task because it is never finished and is one which from its ceaseless difficulty draws its merit and prestige.

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