

EDITORIAL

RECOGNITION OF FOREIGN MEDICAL DEGREES

From time to time, quarrels regarding the recognition of foreign degrees arise, and invariably the arguments are charged with emotion, but generally not backed by reason. It does not seem that most of the disputants understand the significance of the term recognition, and most of the time, they are satisfied merely in throwing mud around, making such accusations as protectionism, selfishness, academic and professional ignorance and arrogance.

Actually, recognition may be one of three basic varieties. Firstly, there is the recognition of a qualification by the Government. In general, this recognition is an acknowledgement of standards of training and suitability for employment in the civil service. Hence the local Government have accepted the diploma of Raffles and Medical Colleges in the past, and are accepting the degrees of Singapore and Malayan Universities.

Secondly, there is the recognition between Universities, where students receiving training in one University may get suitable exemption when transferring themselves to another, and graduands of one may be acceptable for post-graduate training *at graduate level* in the other. This is entirely a matter between the Universities, and is usually based on whether the curriculum and mode of training of the two affected Universities are similar enough to permit interchange.

Finally, there is the professional recognition which is imposed to ensure that the public would get a minimum standard of service, and is usually given after suitable assessment of the candidate and reasonable rigid insistence on the training schedule.

Locally, arguments about recognition of foreign medical degrees would seem to run along these lines:

- (a) That there is a shortage of doctors in Malaya, and hence no doctor should be refused registration provided he has satisfactory qualification.
- (b) That many of the foreign Universities now not recognised are world famous, and for us not to recognise these Uni-

versities would be to imply that we are ignorant of their achievements.

- (c) That there are many local or foreign citizens graduated in unrecognised Universities willing to come, but not able to, because of the unreasonable attitude of the registration body.

Thus, one often repeated argument is to state that Harvard and Yale are two of the world famous institutions, and their medical training is rigid and of exceptional high standard, and hence there should be no reason not to recognise their graduates.

To begin with, one may say the same thing of Oxford and Cambridge, and to point out that their graduates would not be registered by U.S. Government or U.S. Medical bodies unless they sit for and passed a special examination. Surely, even the most untutored would realise that this did not imply ignorance of or contempt for the academic attainments of those Universities on the part of the Americans!

Then, one may ask how many doctors of local origin there are, *who would be coming to work in Malaya* if given the chance? From time to time, we hear of vague statements like "a lot", "a large number", but the fact remains that few indeed, if any, answer advertisements for medical personnel by local Universities, where the registration angle has been no problem. On the other hand, if the question affects only a very small number, then obviously if recognition is going to be urged, the availability of a large number of doctors could not be offered as a real argument.

There is shortage of doctors locally, but *this shortage is in Government services*. For reasons best known to administrators, government service has been unable to attract and retain doctors. But it should be appreciated that there is no real shortage of doctors in private practice, for any one who cares to conduct factual surveys instead of indulging in empty talk, would soon realise that a large proportion of the doctors in private practice is not fully occupied. Idleness and shortage of doctors cannot be reconciled, and cannot be

explained away by high medical fees either, for factual comparison would show that the fees chargeable locally are in fact amongst the lowest when compared with those of other countries. If there is shortage only in Government service, then before urging shortage as a reason for relaxing requirements, one should ask if the people affected are willing to come back to work in Government services. In fact, local Government has already accepted all and sundry from America, Japan, Korea, Formosa, Phillipines, India, and Germany to work in their services. There is no question of local citizens being excluded because for them, the relaxation has already been made in Government service. The protests would make it obvious that those people who want relaxation are not really keen to help out in the place when the shortage occurs, but merely using the shortage as a pretext to achieve other ends.

Finally, it should be realised that recognition is generally sought for by the institutions and not by the individual. No nation in the world in her senses would on her own offer recognition to foreign institution unasked, for in the event of a rebuff, she would be the laughing stock of the whole world. Up to date, there

has been no such request, and there in fact exists no reason for such request to be made. What we are faced with then is not recognition of Universities, but of individuals, and few at that; and such a problem could surely be met more simply by individual assessment than by advocating a wholesale reversal of policies.

Finally, professional recognition is a matter of concern mainly to Universities and professional bodies. Surely, in matters of this sort we should hear the views of American Medical Association rather than politicians or journalists when it comes to American medical degrees. The American Medical Association insists on an assessment for all outside degrees, and this is not a question of that Americans can afford to pick and choose, because it has been stated amply elsewhere by responsible people that America too is "short of doctors". The considered action of responsible bodies like American Medical Association and Indian Medical Association (note: India has a worse doctor to population ratio than Singapore) should cool the emotions, and permit more sensible thinking to come to the surface.

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