

EDITORIAL

NATIONAL MEDICAL PLANNING

Differentiation and specialisation are qualities concomitant with the progress to maturity. As one ascends the scale of life, the one-cell amoeba on the one end, and the complex human being on the other, one readily appreciates the increasing differentiation and specialisation so that cells lose their pluripotency in order to gain specialised ability. Thus for the living, there would appear to be a balance of gain and loss, or a give and take. The tactile sense organs become so highly developed that they are extremely discriminative of texture, distance, and in some rare cases even of colour, but this amazing ability has been accompanied by the loss of ability to appreciate all other senses.

In knowledge, it would seem apparent that development is towards differentiation and specialisation. Under this, medicine has blossomed from a know-all man of medicine, to a physician, a surgeon, a gynaecologist, and a horde of other disciplinarians. Further specialisation sees the emergence of cardiology, neurology etc. only to sub-divide further into cardiac-physiologist, electrocardiographer, neuro-biochemist and cybernetician. The omnipotent single man has given way to many little gods each dominating and authoritative in his regime, but sadly lacking in stature when put in the domain of the other. Meanwhile the patient's care has become the goal of a team effort, and from being "my patient", he has gained the dubious status of "our case"!

However ridiculous as it appears when thus crudely reduced to pen and ink, the increasing complexity of the medical discipline has rendered a single man inadequate, and specialisation and ultra-specialisation have come and will be with us, whether we like it or not, until perhaps the ultimate discovery is made to unify all branches of knowledge. Hence, for any country, and place, and any doctor, progress must be prepared for by the gradual turn over to specialisation, and no medical service can remain complacent on what it has, but must actively plan for what it is to be.

Locally, medicine has been taught for 60 years—two generations if measured in terms

of man. We have now general practitioners and general specialist, all doing their share of work so successfully that our death rate has dropped enough to cause insomnia to population experts. The time has come for us to take the next step forward—to a greater specialisation. We need to establish purer disciplines like neurology, cardiology, endocrinology, gastroenterology etc. and we must do so if we are to continue the logical growth of local medicine.

To do this, we must no doubt accept this concept of increasing specialisation, and abandon our old ideas of a general man interested in a speciality, for specialised disciplines have grown too complex and involved for a part time man to master. Next we have to reappportion our finance so that definite allotment is made for research and study projects, and in a relatively small nation like Malaysia, we may have to accept an over planning body so that there is no undue reduplication of man power and facilities. A serum institute in Penang, a tropical research centre in Kuala Lumpur, and a medical research unit in Singapore may in the end give us greater benefit than can be derived from the situation when Penang, Kuala Lumpur and Singapore all would have their own centres, for in the latter, our scanty trained manpower will be scattered, and the financial resources will be shared perhaps to the point of inadequacy for all. The moral would appear to be that it is better to have a very good centre in the whole of Malaysia than to have a mediocre one in every State—the former will make us one day take our place amongst the foremost workers in the field, but the latter can only give us the satisfaction of saying that we are keeping up and tailing closely behind!

This concept of over all planning as a nation would seem the more valuable in these days, because many people are so intent on their own private field, that they forget we are no longer in the pluripotent stage of one-cell life, and in their eagerness to sell their own pet schemes, they may well delay our medical advance for yet another generation to come.

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