

EDITORIAL

SPECIALISING IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

That instinct of survival is probably the basic drive which leads to competition for the maintenance of excellence means little more than the ability to excel over the others, and in so doing, one improves the chance of self-survival. Hence, there is the rat race, and so-much-deplored academic dictum of publish or perish best seen in countries where free enterprise is upheld. Competition must inevitably mean a strife for the mores, and in the fields of learning too, there exists the compulsion of knowing in greater and greater depth, so that in due course, breadth of vision is sacrificed by the need to burrow deeper into the heart of a matter. Medicine is no exception, for as soon as a sufficient number of doctors has been produced to meet roughly the usual demands, the race will be on to be more knowledgeable, more skilful and more selective. From the humble beginning of general practitioners, there arise general consultants and specialists, and from these collective groups, further subdivisions into cardiology, neurology, endocrinology, and a large varieties of disciplines inevitably follow. Then subdivisions beget further subdivisions, as neurology breaks up into neurophysiology, diagnostic neurology, neurosurgery, neurobiochemistry ad infinitum.

With this division in profusion, medicine benefitted by more rapid progress as study is intensified, and the patients gained in that more is known of their illnesses and hence less and less of hopeless problems remain. Since such activities of division and subdivision can go on indefinitely, there can theoretically never be a time when doctors get too many unless knowledge of disease and health comes totally within human ken, and no further subdivision becomes possible. The day when such a situation may arise is nowhere in sight, and hence for the foreseeable future, the race continues, and doctors, no matter what number is produced will be profitably occupied.

However, as subdivision proceeds, sophistication arises, and increasing sophistication in scientific topics means greater and greater cost, as more intricate and grander scales are involved, until a time must come when a developing country especially a small one will have to ask the inevitable question: "Is the race worthwhile,

and can the nation afford it?". These questions are the more evident when one comes to science where cost comes to billions, and the sophistication and subdivision are such that few if any of the participating scientists can maintain an overall view outside his own narrow expertise. Some smaller nations may even think that it is cheaper to be content with the second place, and wait to make use of advances discovered by others in due course, instead of struggling valiantly and at times fruitlessly to initiate a lead.

If this view is true, and that sophistication can only be achieved with a great cost, far beyond the capability of many nations, then in the field of knowledge and achievement at present, only two or three nations can claim their places, and the rest must be satisfied with their roles as hangers-on and be perpetually relegated to a secondary position. But backward nations like China, said by expert assessors to be many centuries behind industrially, are nevertheless able to break into scientific preserves and explode their bombs and plan their space rockets. Moreover, the many great ideas in science have come up outside the richest and most powerful nations, and it is with policies of financial bait, preferential immigration and brain drain, ironically from the lesser to the greater, that has given rise to the delusion that all the brainpower and achievement belong to the rich nations alone.

One of the principal reason that wealth and size of any nation are not entirely 'in keeping with scientific achievement is the fact that achievement in many cases is through a breakthrough, and most of the breakthrough is intuitive, dependent more on the brainpower than the facilities. Of course, a good man backed by the best of facilities would theoretically be unbeatable and ideally placed for advancement, but in practice, facilities can by their sophistication enslave thought and suppress originality which are the cornerstone for any progress, and it is not infrequent to see new and important ideas emerge because a good man is forced to seek original solutions due to the lack of up-to-date facilities. In truth, "idea makyth the man, and man the experiment."

Gwee Ah Leng