

EDITORIAL

DIALOGUE

In the last few years, a number of doctors are concerned about the apparent gulf that seems to separate the Government from the profession. Matters such as the registration of foreign graduates, the dissemination of information of infectious diseases, the issue and verification of international health certificates, the intake of medical students, and the extent of free medical services, loom large as sources of contention between the two, when it would be logical instead to expect that in these matters, the two would have good reason to act and plan in close consultation. The official pronouncement would seem to hint at bigotry, unprogressiveness, and even obstructionism exhibited by the profession, and a good deal of official effort is apparently designed to overcome these undesirable traits of the profession! Hence, there have been public speeches of an uncomplimentary nature from high sources, and obvious lack of cooperation if not active undermining of professional activity from the executives.

On the other hand, the profession has reacted with arguments, indignation and even passivity, and many issues of mutual concern have become painful topics of contention even though on careful analysis, it seems obvious that the standpoint of both has been practically identical! Such a state can only come to pass because of the absence of a proper dialogue, so that in the place of mutual understanding, there are resentment and suspicion.

Some doctors feel that the profession should go out of its way to woo the Government, on the rationale that the profession can only be effective if the Government supports it, and that much harm and damage can result, particularly to the profession as a group, in the face of active Governmental antagonism. Yet other see in such proposal unworthy attempts of appeasement and compromise, and argue that the professional conscience must not be too readily sacrificed just for the sake of some ephemeral goodwill.

However, what has been overlooked and ignored has been that a dialogue per se between the Government and the profession is meaningless and purposeless. The Government has many more pressing and urgent matters to attend to

than to carry on a dialogue of no definite value, and the profession too does not expect any realistic achievement to be derived from such an activity. It is when a topic of mutual importance becomes the subject of a dialogue that both parties become interested. There are two kinds of Government, one autocratic which imposes its will on the people, and at its worst is tyrannical and dictatorial, but at its best can be a benign and munificent father-figure with great potentialities; and the other a democratic one which is elected by the people to run the Governmental machinery in accordance with the will of the people. Singapore Government is an elected one and therefore must belong to the latter, and would in that sense be of a necessity interested in the wishes of the people. Whereas the medical profession is in fact the people themselves, however small a portion it constitutes, and in fact is the only group of the people who has authority enough to ask to shape medical policies and dictate medical needs. It not only speaks for the people in a special field, but in fact constitutes the people themselves in expecting the service to be rendered.

Seen as such, a Government not listening to and consulting the profession in professional matters would be an unimaginable act of folly in any democratic set up, and the profession should really not be concerned with the alleged absence of governmental interest, but rather spend its time to ensure that it is not alienated from the people and thereby becomes a class apart. For if the profession is divorced from the aspirations, woes and needs of the people, then it no longer merits the attention of a government which sets out to serve.

Thus if there is any disharmony or discord, the solution is not to seek a dialogue whatever such a word may imply, but to scrutinise the activity of the profession to make sure that it is in line with the welfare and wishes of the people at large. In which case, the dialogue will come to the profession unasked, and there needs be no loose talk about compromising professional conscience.

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