

President's Message

Education and the Modern Plague

“Our mission is of the highest and of the noblest kind, not alone in curing disease but in educating people in the laws of health, and in preventing the spread of plagues and pestilences.”

Sir William Osler

The modern physician is more than ever the teacher, the educator, the consistent humanitarian, the coordinator of the application of evolving knowledge for the purpose of human betterment. So too has the psychiatrist broadened his role as he has moved from the asylum to the center of the social maelstrom and as he has increasingly viewed the sick person in the global perspective of an organism interacting in a social milieu.

In general medicine, advances in treatment of the damaged body have been striking; yet they have been outweighed perhaps by the understanding of the development of disease and by the creation of the means to prevent such illness. Longevity and the feeling of well-being probably owe more to the ability of modern medicine to attack the roots of plague and pestilence *en masse* than to the laborious repair work directed to the single already diseased human organism. If the essence of disease control is prevention, then the essence of prevention is knowledge and action based on adequate education, not only of the doctor but of the potential patient. Thus the physician is not only a healer but also a student and a teacher.

Plague and pestilence still stalk the advanced societies. The forms may no longer be those of the watery, crampy dehydration of cholera or the massive fevers of smallpox or typhus. Modern pestilence must also include the individual and mass behaviors that result in violence, cruelty, damaged minds, and death – in numbers that bring to mind the notorious plagues of yore.

Perhaps that is one reason why psychiatrists have taken an increasing interest in the interaction involved in the individual's adaptation to his society. Psychiatrists continue to seek an understanding of the modern pestilence and ways to minimize its destructive effects. Is this not a factor in the growth of an organization, now six hundred strong, devoted to the application of psychiatry to behavior in society and to the social control system – the law?

The forensic psychiatrist, while devoted to the problem of the individual, sees himself or herself as a valuable contributor to the social welfare, not as an agent of the existing order but as a teacher, adviser, and participant in the sociolegal process. The forensic psychiatrist must be no mere mechanic in ritualistic devotion to the maintenance of a fixed anachronistic present.

Society itself is a vital, throbbing, fluid organism that is capable of change, for good and bad, from within. As society has evolved, so has the role of the psychiatrist in his fight against "disease."

A prime purpose of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law is education, not only for its members as students but for its members as teachers, both of the body politic and its political body, the law.

Psychiatry cannot in isolation deal with the "cure of disease" unless it also devotes itself to educating the people in the laws of health and in preventing the spread of plagues and pestilences that so befoul our times.

As the new President of AAPL, I hope to direct my efforts to influence this great Academy in its pursuit of the noble mission proclaimed by Osler only a few decades ago. To the extent that we learn to teach ourselves, we can participate in the more important role of communicating for the legitimate betterment of the society of which we are an integral part.

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