The Role of Medicine in World Peace

World peace is a hope that challenges the heart and mind. It is a desire that will be attained only by prodigious effort and by the will of man to understand the problems of his neighbor.

The theory is held by many that war is a biologic necessity and inevitable. The idea is not easily dislodged from the mind of man, for he has been indoctrinated with it through the centuries by advocates of the belief that “might makes right.” War as a biologic necessity becomes absurd in the light of present-day scientific enlightenment, and the realization that to permit its occurrence is to court world destruction.

The struggle for world peace is a stupendous undertaking. It is an effort that requires the active participation of all members of society. The medical profession, because of its heritage and training in the alleviation of suffering, is especially destined to assume a place of leadership in this struggle. The well-informed physician appreciates that nations and customs change from time to time, but that the heart of man remains fundamentally the same. He is keenly aware of the importance of knowing the laws that govern the biologic organization of the individual and of human nature. Most important of all for the physician, his requisite of love of medicine must of necessity imply a love of humanity also.

History eloquently records that two of the dominant forces in the betterment of man have been religion and the healing art. That they should be so often associated in the mind of man as offering moral leadership is not surprising, for both are striving for the same purpose—the defense against evil. In ancient times disease, which is as old as life itself, was thought to be dealt with best by those chosen by the gods. With the dawn of reason and the casting aside of the fetters of superstition, knowledge became the criterion for the selection of the physician. But always a love of medicine has implied a love for humanity. These two qualities offer a basis for social leadership.

Statesmen have long recognized that physicians possess the qualifications essential in the production of leaders in the fight for peace, but deplore their reluctance to assume their proper place in world politics. They emphasize that physicians have the training and the close association to learn from the people their true hopes, aspirations, and degrees of fortitude, and that they are in a most favorable position to help direct the people’s idealism into proper channels and implement it. Physicians are peculiarly qualified to judge the physical and, to a lesser extent, the mental capabilities of our leaders, and to warn the populace when disorders arise—disorders that so often may lead to tragedy and loss of human life and dignity. Medicine may indeed act as a catalyzing agent for better understanding among men, and a potent force against ignorance, which so often breeds evil.

Virchow, in 1849, forcefully described the responsibility that medicine must bear in order to assume its proper place in the life of man:
“Should medicine ever fulfill its greatest ends, it must enter into the larger political and social life of our time. It must indicate the barriers which obstruct the normal complications of the life cycle and remove them. Should this era come to pass medicine, whatever it may then be, will become the common good of all.”1 There are many in the medical profession who are fully aware of medicine's responsibility to humanity, are motivated by the high ideals of public service, and give gladly of their time and substance to bring such dreams to a full fruition. Others believe they are willing to join in this great crusade but never succeed in implementing such a belief with action. Finally, there are those who lack a sense of responsibility to humanity and are content to spend their lives in self-satisfied isolation, with no altruistic regard for their fellow-man.

Medicine, which is science in the making, can no longer enjoy the luxury of provincialism; for science, as Pasteur noted, knows no country. Although the voice of a single physician raised in behalf of humanity on the international scene may not always be heard, when augmented by the many voices of his associates it may have far-reaching effects. It is important that we in the medical profession not only combine our voices on matters of local concern, but also unite with our colleagues all over the world in a concerted effort for the betterment of mankind. At every opportunity we must join with other guilds and organizations, and those of other nations and races in the crusade for peace, if peace is ever to have birth.

One of the most potent and successful methods for promoting good will and understanding among physicians throughout the world is the international medical meeting. Such meetings afford a splendid opportunity for the exchange of ideas and information. They rapidly teach that physicians and other people, no matter what their race, creed, or origin, have many of the same hopes and dreams, and that many of the apparent differences are mere misunderstandings based on ignorance. How refreshing and stimulating it is to realize that good ideals and ideas can come from so many!

The American College of Chest Physicians has been a pioneer in the promotion of international medical meetings and has aided greatly in the dissemination of medical knowledge and the promotion of better understanding among men. The next international meeting of the American College of Chest Physicians is to be held in Tokyo, Japan, in September of this year. Not only does it promise to be highly educational and instructive, but also it affords a splendid opportunity to enjoy the famous hospitality of an oriental nation. It should do much to promote international understanding and a realization that to know is not to fear, for knowledge and truth conquer all.

REFERENCE

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