

The lost sheep of modern medicine: “From hurt to heart – regaining the Midas’ Touch”

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*“If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.”
Dalai Lama.*

It was 19th century England: A doctor is hurrying to graduation ceremony at Oxford in full academic regalia. On his way, he is stopped by his childhood friend who implores him to have a look at his son apparently suffering from untreatable whooping cough. Though running late, the doctor agreed to examine the child. As he arrived at his bedside, the child seemed spellbound by the doctor’s opulent dress. After examining the child and finding that he had not taken food for 2 days, the doctor sat down, peeled an orange and fed the child lovingly and chatted with him for sometime. He told the boy that it was the magical fruit which if he eats will get cured in no time. Though the illness looked grave, he comforted the boy’s father and left for the ceremony. For the next one and a half months, while the child battled with the deadly disease, the doctor came to meet him everyday. Each time he was dressed in his magnificent robes, as if to enchant the child and wean him away from the clutches of death. The child recovered over time and the family remained grateful to the doctor for as long as he lived. The physician was Sir William Osler. The story is an incomparable act of compassionate care for an ailing human being.

Practicing medicine in an era unblemished by the lure of wealth and luxury, unhindered by the omnipresence of technology and machines, Osler and many doctors of his time practiced what they preached: compassion for the sick, empathy for the wounded, listening to their sufferings, sharing their pain - the virtues entrenched deeply in the heart and soul of medicine. And then came ‘modernization’ - a tsunami, a cataclysmic change that that

shook the roots of tradition challenged the norm and ventured into hitherto uncharted territory.

Modern medicine, like many of its equally distinguished scientific brethren, had set out on a breathtaking journey. Treading new grounds, discovering the unimaginable, realizing the impossible - medicine had started soaring to unparalleled heights. The marriage of technology and medicine was a godsend. Countless numbers of the sick and needy got a new lease of life; doctors were the answer to every question – the proverbial Oracle of Delphi. Ironically in the quest to decipher the unknown, in the relentless journey to success, the child which Osler saw was left behind; the values on which the edifice of modern medicine had prospered were obscured. Compassionate care for the sick - the lost sheep of modern medicine, is buried under the monumental success of modern medicine.

But what exactly do we mean by compassion? How does it affect our care for the patient? Webster dictionary defines ‘compassion’ or its Sanskrit equivalent term ‘karuna’, as a feeling of wanting to help someone who is sick, hungry, or in trouble. Obviously the question is: as doctors are we not doing that for every moment that we live? Are we not caring for the patient by discovering new drugs? Are we not helping the sick by diagnosing their illness? Is not curing the most difficult diseases an act of compassion? The answer is both yes and no. And herein probably lies the irony of modern medicine. With each step towards treating the human, have we equally managed to be humane? In this frenzied world of technological advances, awe-inspiring machines and path-breaking molecular discoveries, are we treating the disease or the diseased?

As someone has famously said, “The world is a great show and physicians have a front row seat.” Medicine has originated out of the primal sympathy of man towards fellow men; out of the desire to help those in sorrow, need, and sickness. We cannot deal with our patients, our fellow human beings as a man would deal in corn and coal. Medicine is sustained by the ability to recognize in the brutal struggles of life its’ beautiful poetry, the poetry of the commonplace, of the ordinary man, of the plain toil-

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worn woman, with their loves and their joys, their sorrows and grieves. The great psychiatrist Carl Menninger had aptly summed it up saying, “The best treatment for depression is to go to the other side of the railroad tracks and ask what you can do to make a difference.”

The gargantuan leaps in modern medicine have brought back the smiles to millions of sick, distressed and needy. But have we, as doctors, had the time to stand back and watch them smile? Have we had the time to hold their hands, even knowing that the disease is beyond the realm of cure? Probably that is where modern medicine has lost its Midas touch; and, much of it has probably to do with the decadence that has gripped civilization in general. God created the vast greens, the clear blue sky and gave man the liberty to run and explore. Man found solace in his air-conditioned room, his television boxes and the remote control. God had created for us these abundant plethora of fruits and vegetables - the cauliflowers, the spinaches, the broccolis and the potatoes; but Man came up with pizzas, double cheese burgers, and cola drinks. Generation Y – the *neo-Homo sapiens*, a generation that thrives on running late, pushing your luck, sidestepping responsibilities and jumping to conclusions. In the rat race for success, the all engulfing desire to succeed, values and virtues get trampled upon. Compassion is not the “in” thing, it does not trend on twitter, it is not ‘liked’ on Facebook. So why bother? Doctors are but an integral part of the same society. Somewhere this unfortunate desire to forego emotion and march on like an automated machine has affected the noble profession of medicine also. Not that our healing powers have ceased, not that our diagnostic abilities have diminished, they are just there; but certainly the touch has no longer the warmth, the smile has lost its innocence, the eyes seem distant.

How do we maintain our energy and enthusiasm in the midst of patient demands and the time constraints of practice? One solution is to enjoy the journey and not always focusing on the destination. Tucked away in our subconscious is an idyllic vision. We see ourselves on a

long train journey that spans the continent. Out the windows we drink in the passing scene of cars on nearby highways, of children waving at a crossing, of cattle grazing on a distant hillside, of smoke pouring from a power plant, of row upon row of corn and wheat, of flatlands and valleys, of mountains and rolling hillsides, of city skylines and village halls; but uppermost in our minds is the final destination. On a certain day, at a certain hour, we will pull into the station. Once we get there, so many wonderful dreams will come true and the pieces of our lives will fit together like a completed jigsaw puzzle. However, sooner or later we must realize there is no station, no place to arrive at once and for all. The true joy of life is the trip. The station is only a dream. It constantly outdistances us. “Relish the moment” is a good motto, and the time has come to stop pacing the aisles and counting the miles. Life must be lived as we go along. The station will come soon enough.

So where do we stand today? Has modern medicine turned from a ‘patient-centric’ to a ‘disease-centric’ approach? Despite the gloom and despair, all is not lost. As Martin Luther King had famously said, “We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope.” The courage of Dr. Martin Salia, who selflessly laid down her life while caring for patients with Ebola, reinforce our faith in the innate goodness and compassion that embodies the spirit of medicine and its practice. The aim should be to ensure that the likes of Dr Martin become the rule and not the exception. The kindly word, the cheerful greeting, the sympathetic look, even when a patient is past all hopes - that is the need of the hour. It is time to bring back the lost sheep home, time to tell the child left behind that he is not alone, time to reverse the wheels of time and reinvigorate medicine with the compassion and kindness that has been its’ forte since time immemorial . The winds of change are here and that change should start from us. As one Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi had reminded, “You must be the change you wish to see in the world.”

