

Commentary

Service for Fee Not Fee for Service

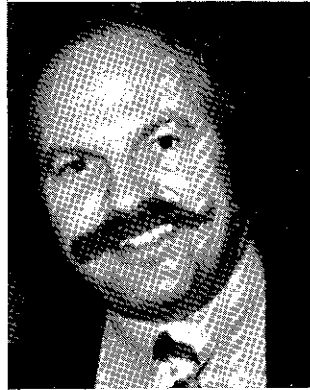
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The idea of service has fallen into a great deal of disrepute in latter years. Time was, not so long ago, when both individuals and groups often took a great deal of pride in their ability to provide good, dignified service to others, fully realizing that in so doing their humanity was not diminished in any way. The good servant saw himself and was seen by others as making a real contribution toward the orderly conduct of daily living, and his status in society was secure. Even today, official letters written by the British Government bear on top the words "On Her Majesty's Service." Servants and their masters (*this term did not always denote domination and unfairness*) realized that they both needed each other for their existence and that they had an inter-dependency from which both benefited. They often liked each other, respected each other and truly felt at a loss without each other.

Twentieth century mass society living in huge megalopolis centers has brought an immense change in our value systems. Even neighbors are often suspect. Distrust and fear of strangers are constant companions, whether we live within the city or in the suburbs. The increasing crime rate is only the obvious rationalization of this fear and its immediate, but not ultimate, cause. As we trust less, we teach our children to be wary of unknown situations and people, and in effect we are daily paying the high price of human isolation for our security.

Human Qualities Lost

As a consequence, many important human qualities of the past have been lost. Not only is gracious living at a slow pace mostly a nostalgic memory, but also open friendliness, warmth and good service have practically disappeared. The term "mastery," which in the past denoted competence and an ability to perform well in one's field, now often is associated with disrespect and unfair treatment of others. In the social upheaval in which we find ourselves, the idea of democracy is also being grossly distorted. It is often misinterpreted as meaning that we all are the same, when really it means that we are equal in our humanity and rights. Thus, the idea of being a servant to another person is not interpreted as a freely-chosen



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professional role, but instead is seen as demeaning to the servant and as robbing him of self-respect and dignity. Society as a whole is the loser. Every day each of us comes across many situations where service is given begrudgingly, angrily and without good will, beginning with the pouring of a cup of coffee in a restaurant and the repair of our TV set to the quality of service one finds in a hospital.

All service professions are similarly the losers. Household workers and other lower paying service professions are disappearing, and it is extremely difficult to find competent help of this type. Electricians, gardeners, drivers, painters, seem to offer their services reluctantly and almost expect us not only to pay them fairly for their honest work, but

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also to be grateful for the fact that they are willing to render it. Servicemen more often than not adopt an attitude of arrogance and unreasonableness and act as if they are doing us a favor by serving us (which is now called servicing) when, in fact, that is what they freely contract with us to do.

No Profession Escapes

The higher paying and more prestigious service professions, such as accounting, law and medicine, have not escaped a similar change in their basic attitude towards others. Historically, this obviously was not so. In the past, the doctor was always on call, and the sick patient knew that he could count on his physician to render him service whenever he needed it. To be a physician was a calling, not a profession, a holy trust that was enveloped in symbols and ceremonies that expressed the high regard for the physician who was willing to assume freely the heavy responsibility for the lives of others. It is natural, therefore, that physicians were usually the most respected citizens in their communities. They not only earned a good living but were generally looked upon as wise men of high ethical character whom others wanted to emulate and actually looked up to.

Fee for service so rendered was rarely questioned. The doctor making a house call was given a fresh, clean towel for his hands as well as reverence and gratitude for his devotion. The fee was usually the least the patient could do in return for the services of a physician. Those who had more paid more, but it was not uncommon for a physician to come home carrying a chicken or other products made by the patient or members of his family. This indeed is the origin of the sliding scale of fees in medicine.

The overuse of words turns them into cliches and causes them to lose their meaning. Thus, the words "Fee for Service" have also undergone an inflationary change that reduced their value. When used by physicians, are they meant in their dictionary sense? Are we really happy in our role as servants to our patients? Does our attitude convey to them our acceptance of this position?

The hue and cry for the elimination of the fee for service system may in fact be to a large extent a result of the fact that we often do not behave as servants, true and loyal servants, to our patients. Instead, we appear as busy, self-important and sometimes arrogant masters. As physicians are we not sometimes disrespectful of the fears and sensitivities of our patients and usually disrespectful of their time?

Demands for Changes

The demands for changes in the delivery system of medical care may well have deeper and different roots than economics alone. Underneath it all may well lie the fact that basically we often are not providing service for which we expect a fee, but, instead, convey the impression through our busy practices that we are really out for the fee and somewhat hurriedly and unhappily also provide the service.

This obviously is a distortion of reality. In fact, the patient is our employer and we have the responsibility to faithfully render service at its best. In taking the Oath of Hippocrates, we have sworn to live a life that has many elements of devotion and self-sacrifice in it. We freely undertook an obligation to prefer the patient's health to our convenience. Although we are entitled to live in comfort and economic well-being, hopefully this was not the main reason for our going into medicine and is no reason for remaining there.

It would indeed have been wonderful, but remarkably unusual, if the majority of physicians could live up to this ideal, which is in the best traditions of Medicine. Unfortunately, it makes no sense to expect that under the changed value systems and in the prevalent isolation of our society, physicians would be so different and so much better than other people. Although our calling imposes special burdens on us individually and as a group, we are nonetheless subject to the same weaknesses that others are subject to. We are different in our education, role and responsibilities — but not in our humanity. Physicians are subject to the same temptations as non-physicians. Those who complain about the short-comings of the medical practitioners will have to realize that they are not only unfair but also unrealistic.

It would be of immense practical importance for those who advocate a change in the delivery system of medical care to remember that no administrative change could basically alter the nature of Man, even if that man is a physician. It is nonetheless our responsibility, individually and collectively, to hold the hallowed traditions of Medicine in front of us at all times. Though we are bound to fail and fail again in our attempts to live up to the ideal, we must always attempt to remember that medicine exists to provide a service for individuals in pain and need. Defending the virtues of the private practice of Medicine might be easier and more successful if it were seen as providing service for a fee rather than the usual "Fee for Service."