EDITORIALS

Presidential Address
The Medical Association of South Africa

Anesthesiaology is pleased to republish, in part, the Presidential Address of Dr. Harry Grant-Whyte, Anesthesiologist of Durban, South Africa, and bring to the attention of our readers his unique achievement in gaining the high office of President of the Medical Association of South Africa. This accomplishment is a “first” for which we congratulate him. His Address was delivered before the Forty-First Medical Congress and Twentieth Annual Scientific Meeting of the Medical Association of South Africa, City Hall, Durban, South Africa, September 16, 1957. This Address was first published in the South African Medical Journal 31: 945 (Sept. 21) 1957.

It is noteworthy that Dr. Grant-Whyte refers in all sincerity to “the movement to a recognition of the truth that science is one” and that “in the very needs of men all over the world, there has appeared first the world associations of medical men . . . who hold the promise in them of offering to us, and the rest of mankind, a new revelation to serve us as we enter a new era.” In this respect, Dr. Grant-Whyte’s Presidential Address represents an appropriate companion piece to Dr. Griffith’s editorial. Can we in the American Society of Anesthesiologists afford to avoid the challenge of becoming a cooperative part of the World Federation of Societies of Anesthesiologists?—Editor

At the outset of my address, I am sure you would wish to join me in an expression of our regret at the absence of our honoured patron, His Excellency the Governor-General, Dr. F. G. Jansen, who was to have opened this Congress. As a result of an arduous European tour, Dr. Jansen has been indisposed and had to postpone his return home.

In his place we have with us His Honour the Administrator of Natal, Mr. D. G. Shepstone, The Chancellor of the University of Natal. We have come to know Dr. Shepstone so well that I am sure he will not look upon the welcome we extend to him as a sort of left-handed acknowledgement of his person. For him, a personal regard is felt and appreciated by every member of the public of this Province.

Allow me, therefore, your Honour, to convey to you the spontaneous appreciation of this Assembly for your presence here, and for the words you have spoken to us.

In the past, we of the Medical Association in South Africa have always chosen to elect one of our number as President of Congress, other than the President of the Medical Association for the year. A change has been made, and it happens that as President of the Association, I have also become President of this Congress; a double honour which calls from me, as it were, a double appreciation. It is never easy to give adequate expression to one’s gratitude for such a privilege.
It is an honour I shall long remember, and one which calls for many acknowledgements. It is the first time an anaesthetist has been so honoured, not only in South Africa, but as far as my knowledge goes, in the western world. May I, therefore, share it with my fellow anaesthetists.

The position in which you have placed me offers another satisfaction which sustains me in any inadequacy I feel in addressing you tonight—the delight with which we welcome our distinguished visitors. Never before in our history has this Congress enjoyed the interest and presence of so distinguished a company, and I am sure I speak for all of us in saying we have looked forward not merely with anticipation, but with eager excitement, to their arrival. Their presence is not merely a signal honour to South Africa’s Medical Congress; it is a signal honour to our country at large, an occasion of national interest.

I shall not single them out individually. They come from the centres of learning; from the schools of Europe, the Old World, steeped in age and thought, and from the schools of the New World, of the Americas. Some of them have gained national recognition in their own fields, and some international recognition, Presidents of Royal Colleges, and Presidents of the world medical organizations, men of research, skilled in practice, philosophers, administrators, surgeons, physicians, covering every branch of medical science. One or two have come at some inconvenience to themselves, like the Consultant-General to the World Medical Association, Dr. Routley, who, bound for the World Congress at Istanbul, was kind enough, and felt interested enough, to arrange his plans to include this Congress. We are to meet them and to hear them, to draw from them some of the inspiration that imbues them, and, we hope, to offer them something of our work, to look at, and assess.

I have said that they come to us from the very centres of learning, of Europe and the Americas. In that respect they are nearer in mind and context to the quite fantastic changes that are overtaking the world of science, and it is worth while, on an occasion like this, to glance at the nature of those changes and to give thought to the role of medicine in them. Most of us here are, in a very real sense, products of the pre-atomic age. We are nineteenth century men. Our university education was taken towards the end of a scientific era which closed with the discovery of the nature of the atom, the amendment to Dalton’s atomic theory, the overthrow of the textbook axiom that the atom was indivisible.

This discovery is the greatest single discovery since Isaac Newton. It, and the energies released by this single fact, are changing the world with startling rapidity, altering the shape of all man’s activities, shifting the centres of gravity of power, reorientating social and individual
lives, and, as it proceeds, maybe calling for a completely new revelation of man’s place in the Universe. We live on the very edge of that revelation in thought and action. Now, at its advent, its nature and character are but darkly understood, its future direction unknown, its seas uncharted. But no man can be unaware of it, even at this stage, and there are features of it which are certain to bring vast changes in the education, outlook and practice of every medical man.

It is not my purpose to traverse them all, even were I equipped to do so, but consider, for example, one of the most obvious, and certainly one of the most interesting features of the new scientific era, the changing industrial scene as automation and atomic power are projected into the means of production. For many years medical science has directed some of its energies to industrial diseases, of the mind as well as of the body. Man’s dependence on work, industrial labour, the sweat of his brow, has had a sort of Biblical inevitability, a finality of permanence, around which man has organized all his individual, social and political life.

The almost Biblically-ordained finality of this order is on the point of disappearing. Yesterday a man was paid to work. The size of our revolution is that tomorrow he will be paid not to work. The virtues and compensations of work, daily work, are fast disappearing, and with them will disappear some of the ills of body and mind which are the accompaniments of industrial labour. Already, in some countries the working week and the working day have been so amputated that even now it is possible to foresee a time when the medical problem of men not at work will be as important as the industrial problems of men at work. You may have noticed that I have not used the word leisure in this context. The word leisure seems to convey a sense of contentment and well-being, but as medical men we are already aware of the ills that beset many people who are leisured in the social and financial sense, some of which ills are the result of being not at work, of having no work, and of not enjoying the rewarding compensations of work.

It may well be, of course, that changes of which I speak will come upon us gradually, allowing time for man to adapt himself, his political, industrial, and social order to the new conditions. It is true that all scientific progress reveals an ebb and flow, periods of startling advance followed by periods of quiescence, allowing man to catch up with himself, as it were. It seems to be a feature of nature that it shall be so. But what is also true is that the periods of intense scientific activity are occurring at shorter intervals, calling for more rapid adaptation in every department of life, an adaptation which many people
fail to make, with results that appear as individual ills of mind and body, and social ills demanding correction and treatment.

I confess I sometimes feel that in the physical sciences and their application, and the early prospect of even greater advances, man may be overreaching himself; and there are many people today, older people, who would advise caution, whisper "Hamba Kahle," go slow, go carefully. But science doesn't work like that, and medical science cannot afford to do so.

But I do ask myself quite deliberately whether the sciences, the physical, the chemical sciences, the social sciences, medical science, are moving with the same momentum, the same speed. A striking aspect of modern scientific thought and research, as I see it, is the movement to a recognition of the truth that all science is one. In the old days, the basic sciences were each treated almost in vacuo, as separate studies. Today, physics, the study of the properties of matter, the new physics, has almost embraced all the rest, including a large part, though not all as yet, of medical science.

And in considering the role of medical science in the new world before us, we can pay tribute to the enormous contribution the other sciences have made and are likely to make in the future to the particular science in which we are engaged; and at the same time note that part of the science of medicine which is peculiar and exclusively its own. Today we could not do without the modern tools of medicine, the products of research in other sciences, from radiology to radioisotopes, and in the future we shall draw from all other sciences, and particularly from atomic physics, the wealth of scientific achievements for application in our work.

There will, however, always be a great difference between medical science and the physical, chemical, and engineering sciences. In a real sense, medical science includes them all. The great difference is that whereas the sciences, pure and applied, deal with what is embraced by the term "properties of matter," medical science is the study and care of the individual living man, homo-sapiens; and homo-sapiens is not only a framework containing all the physical, chemical, and engineering sciences, and all the social sciences, but also a mind, or, if you like, a soul, with all the creative forces of good within him, and destroying forces of evil.

The medical study of him ranges from his sewage system to his personality. His ills are not merely functional and organic, matters of engineering and chemistry, and physics. They are psychological and spiritual. Homo-sapiens, in fact, is a microcosm of the macrocosm of the sciences, not merely of the Universe but of the Cosmos.
Indeed, medical science might well, very well, put over its portals the dictum "The proper study of mankind is man."

And Man is a contrary fellow. He will defy all the laws and the properties of matter. He will go on living when, by all the tests, he should be dead, and he will die when by all the tests he should live. He is at once capable of the greatest sacrifice and courage, and of the harshest cruelty and meanness, individually a god and a devil by turns, socially an organized insect, an atom in the mass of humanity. Medical science is but one source to which he looks for his welfare and salvation. It is important that it shall be equipped to perform the task awaiting it in the new world.

For many years, we in South Africa have been concerned with the need for the establishment here of advanced schools of surgery and physic, comparable to those of Europe and America, and conferring the degrees and fellowships of the standard and merit we have come to respect elsewhere. These colleges are now in being. They will add much to South Africa’s standing in the medical world, and I am happy to think that the first President is with us tonight, my old friend Guy Elliott.

There are other contributions this country and this continent are making and will continue to make to the world’s knowledge. Many of our distinguished visitors will no doubt take a piquant and lively interest in our multi-racial society, in Africa’s tropical and sub-tropical features, and see something of the work being done to meet the peculiar problems that surround us. It has been well said, in this context too, that South Africa is a microcosm of the world’s macrocosm, one of the great laboratories of the world, and that it offers in the broad medical sense, as well as in other departments, very special problems for investigation and research.

I have referred, for example, to the manner in which the people of Europe and America are being projected at speed from the pre-atomic age into the atomic age. It is possible, but unlikely, that the passage will be made smoothly, without ill effects upon those civilizations. But the African native, in his millions, is being called on to make a vastly greater change from a condition of near barbarism, first into an industrial era, and then into an atomic era. The scientific revolution for him is a double one. It is not to be supposed that this can be done without great shocks to African life and well-being.

Admittedly, problems of this size do not touch the average general practitioner, or even the specialist surgeon and physician, though they undoubtedly will do so in the future. I mention them here to call attention to what is, historically, a recent feature of medicine, the World Health Organization and the World Medical Association. And here I
would return to the outset of this address in welcoming first His Honour the Administrator, and second our distinguished visitors, to make a final point.

Occasionally, in recent years, I have had the honour and opportunity of attending some of the Medical Congresses held in other parts of the world, and I have returned only recently from the Congress of the British Medical Association held at Newcastle-on-Tyne. I always leave them with two impressions.

The first is how individual a science is medical science, how personal its application, how individual our vocation as medical men, charged with the health and welfare of the patient. I am struck by the fact, and sometimes awed by it, that no matter how vast the changes going on around us, the size of scientific advance, at the limit all medicine will continue to depend on the virtues of character, and devotion, and skill of the general practitioner, the surgeon, the physician, all those who come into daily contact with the patient.

And the second is how in the very needs of men all over the world, there has appeared first the world associations of medical men, and out of them, and possibly because of them, a new "medicine man," a sort of scientist-philosopher-statesman, some of whom are with us tonight, men who, as it were, have ranged the whole scientific world, who have touched most other worlds, and who hold the promise in them of offering to us, and the rest of mankind, a new revelation to serve us as we enter a new era.

Between the two, between the general practitioner on his daily round and nightly calls, and the statesman of medicine, if I may so describe him, lies the range of medicine now, and the role of medicine in the future. I like to think that both at the top and at the bottom, and in between, the organization we need for our tasks shall never organize away from the individual character of our vocation, or socialize out of us, as it were, the instinct of service, the spirit of enquiry, the forward-looking mind, and the simple humanity, all of which should, if they do not, invest the science of which we are a part.

To that end, surely, this Medical Congress is devoted, like so many others throughout the world. To this end, all the organization that has gone into it is intended. I, as President, am grateful indeed to all those who have so willingly given of their time, energies, and knowledge, to impress our Congress as a worthwhile occasion for the public good.


President, Medical Association of South Africa and Forty-First Medical Congress