

THE DOCTOR'S NOTEBOOK:

A series of opinion articles written by prominent medical leaders

Opportunities & Challenges: The Changing Role of the Physician in Modern Society

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The world has changed a great deal in the 2500 years since Hippocrates penned his Oath for physicians and told them "First, do no harm". How simple life was for doctors in those days: all they had to do was treat the sick. They were universally admired and respected and they topped the charts for job satisfaction.

Fast forward two-and-a-half millennia and the picture is almost unrecognisable. Rather than "doing no harm" the phrase "physician heal thyself" is becoming the heartfelt cry of the profession. The reason for this is the ever-increasing pressure on physicians to work longer hours, accept more responsibility and administrative duties within health care systems, providing less support.

A quick glance through some of the world's leading newspapers and magazines confirm this increased burden: life expectancy has increased worldwide by 20 years since 1950 and upon reaching 60 years of age, the average European man can expect to live for another 17 years (women, another 22).

This is clearly placing a huge strain on pension, social insurance and healthcare systems. According to the OECD, public spending on health and long-term care could rise from 6% of GDP today in OECD nations to 9% in 2040 as a result of the ageing European population.

With demands from an ageing population increasing and financial resources becoming ever more stretched, the pressure upon the world's healthcare systems is fast becoming untenable. As more and more elderly patients need care, and governments run out of money to pay for that care, it is easy to see who is often at the systems' breaking point: the doctor. Not surprisingly, therefore, physicians of the world are feeling perhaps more pessimistic than ever before in the history of the profession.

As the demographic and economic trends of today's world place increasing pressure upon them, so has their traditional role and place in society changed significantly. Today, as internet websites dole out treatment information to patients and satellite and cable TV channels broadcast operations as well as medical procedures, today's patient is now more likely than ever to have strong opinions on his or her illness and how it should be treated.

With ever shrinking financial resources available to pay for many of the innovative new medical treatments, the family physician can no longer simply select the best treatment based upon his or her expertise, knowledge and experience. Instead, they must consider the procurement experts, accountants and budget holders who will second-guess whatever decision is made.

As a result, today's physicians feel that not only is their ability to treat their patients as they would wish being limited, but their status in society is declining too. Even more worrying is that physicians feel this situation is likely to get worse rather than better over coming years. Indeed, a survey carried out last year of physicians in 15 countries found that 'greater bureaucratic regulation of their choices and increasing interference in the physician/patient relationship', were considered the most likely changes to affect them in the next ten years.

Clearly, something needs to change and change soon if the medical profession is to survive in anything like the form it has held for so many centuries. But the demise of those who take their vocation so seriously, that they swear an oath to practice it, can only be avoided if morale can be raised not only to retain existing practitioners but to attract the highest calibre of students who can be the healers of the future.

There is hope: the same survey that illustrated the gloomy outlook which today's physicians fear, also asked them about how they might avoid this negative outcome. While 91 percent of doctors surveyed suggested that 'governments must develop alternative sources of healthcare funding to meet the future needs of an ageing population', closer to home they also felt that they 'need to become more involved in actually setting the healthcare agenda'. Over 75% considered that doctors need to look beyond their traditional role of healthcare providers and take a more active role in the healthcare legislation process.

It may be that it is only by moving outside the clinic, the hospital and the consulting room and taking their views into the halls of government that physicians can protect their ability to do what they have always done best: treat the sick. To preserve and enhance their place in the community and to keep their pact with Hippocrates, physicians may have to treat more than just their patients, but the actual healthcare system in which they work.

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