THE CONTRIBUTION OF MEDICAL MISSIONS TO MEDICAL EDUCATION OVERSEAS

Introduction: The Issue at Hand

Medical education as any other education while handing down a particular knowledge and skill imparts at the very same time standards and an implicit value system. This is independent of the personal awareness and acknowledgement of this fact by the respective educators. The generally accepted guidelines by which the performance of members of the profession is judged tend to be uncritically perpetuated until challenged by incident or in the encounter with an entirely different cultural setting. Challenging the basic principles implies the questioning of the standards thus keeping alive the authentic quest for the art itself.

There does exist a particular branch of medicine which by now has exposed the scientific 'medical model' for more than one and a half century to various different cultural settings, thus stimulating the discussion of the validity of set medical standards. But because this department is generally being looked at as something inferior or substandard to other medical disciplines its potential was - and still is - not adequately utilized. One among numerous reasons for doing so is the general dislike of conscious reference to an expressed value system, which on part of those who engage in it is just the driving force for their commitment and motivation. Another reason for its disdain is the requisite ability of the agents to transform the acquired, often highly sophisticated skill into its very essentials due to the permanent lack of means. Medical mission works is the matter in question here and while the bulk of the MDs refrain from getting involved in it only a few have realized its tremendous personal and professional challenge.

Medical Mission(s) and What It Stands For

Medical mission was first conceived in a common endeavor of physicians, missionaries and businessmen of American, British and Chinese nationality in 1838 in Canton, China, by the formation of the 'China Medical Missionary Society'. The objects of the Society were

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stated as: "to encourage the practice of Medicine among the Chinese, to extend to them some of those benefits, which science, patient investigation, and the ever-kindling light of discovery, have conferred upon ourselves." It further was argued: "Heal the Sick! is our motto, - constituting alike the injunction under which we act, and the object at which we aim, and which, with the blessing of God, we hope to accomplish, by means of scientific practice, in the exercise of an unbought and untiring kindness. We have called ours a Missionary Society, because we trust it will advance the cause of missions, and because we want men to fill our institutions [sc. the hospitals in Canton and Macao], who to requisite skill and experience add the self-denial and the high moral qualities which are usually looked for in a missionary."4

By means of foreign agents and the intelligent use of the press this idea was spread throughout Europe and the United States. Historical circumstances, warlike though, aided in arousing serious interest in the matter. When all foreigners had to leave China, i.e. Canton due to the first Opium War (1840-1842) Rev. Peter Parker, M.D., a Yale alumnus, toured Great Britain and the New England States of the U.S. giving lectures and addressing meetings of physicians on the subject of medical missions stressing their irenic impact. Besides soliciting funds for the Canton enterprise he called for personnel willing to participate. His message was received well and since Parker gained access to and the confidence of most prominent people of that time - medical as well as political - the matter of medical mission(s) became popular. The Royal College of Surgeons at London did offer six scholarships to promising Chinese medical students and supporting groups, often headed by influential dignitaries of the profession were organized in Glasgow, Liverpool, Edinburgh, New York, Boston, Washington D.C. and Philadelphia. Most of these groups did not survive for long except the Edinburgh Medical Missionary Society which is celebrating its Terjubilee in November this year (1991).7

But these events were just the prelude to a startling development which took place in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the period during which medical mission(s) gathered real momentum. In comparatively short a time medical missions were established all around the globe and several new societies founded.8 The reasons for this being economical stability during the Victorian time. Of course, this was the time, when scientific medicine, especially surgery, epidemiology and pharmacology underwent an unprecedented develop-