Healer on Death Bed: How and Why? Revive Him Please!

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The modern physician is a professional. He believes in the science of medicine and the evidence behind it. He is trained to be a part of the system of organized medicine, abiding by the prevailing rules and treating patients to the best of his scientific abilities. He keeps to time, dresses appropriately, has pleasant bedside manners, publishes research and knows his stuff well. Why then are people not satisfied with us, the physicians? Why has the profession lost its singular status?

One of the reasons is that modern physician is more of a scientist and less of a healer. Physician as a scientist is incomplete and needs to be a healer to complement the process of being effective. When science is found lacking, the healer element gives succour to the sufferers and elevates us and our profession. While science of medicine has been in the foreground, the healer element, the soul of the art of medicine, is fading.

Science frequently falls short. While we are proud to be the practitioners of modern medicine—the evidence based medicine, in reality, evidence is only a collection of observations which lead to consistent probabilities. Reproducibility of the available evidence base is far from being absolute and uncertainties abound. A reality check on the ‘progress’ quickly reveals that advances have been heavily dependent on physics and chemistry; in fact biological victories are standing on the shoulders of these basic sciences. For example, early diagnosis of a brain tumour is the victory of the physics behind MRI scan, but we make it our own! While basic sciences have progressed with remarkable speed and accuracy, we have not taken any substantial biological leap, so to say. The cycle of birth, life, suffering and death continues and appears inviolate. Thus, science of medicine alone cannot make a large impact on human well-being. Once these limitations are accepted, the need to counsel, share and guide our patients through their sufferings can be truly appreciated, and this requires the healer as much as the scientist. Hence, the healer within the medicine man has to be kept alive, appreciated, nurtured and trained.

Does today’s medicine give a chance for the healer to manifest? The answer largely is in the negative. Very young individuals are selected for the graduation course, based on their ability to solve multiple choice questions. They are often unclear as to why they are taking this course. Once in, they are forced to memorize large volumes of information and are subjected to tests of memory and application. Reading takes precedence over ward work, as the one who scores well gets into specialty courses. During the formative years, scientific aspects of medicine are so much drummed into the candidates that they begin to believe that the field has indeed reached far and by the best application of their knowledge, they will help alleviate suffering. As things stand, it takes decades of medical practice to appreciate the incompleteness of the accumulated knowledge and the problems thereof, awakening the healer in him through a self-journey, rather late in life.

Aims and objectives of the physicians form another dimension. We humans being reward oriented creatures and societies promoting the concept of ‘climbing the ladder’; individualistic considerations have always been incorporated in the making of the medicine man. In a doctors practising career, large chunks of energy are utilized in ‘progressing’ in medicine, acquiring grants, positions, peer recognition, wealth etc., leaving less than optimal mental space to care for those who are afflicted with illnesses, being a healer.

In organized medicine, administrators and managers reign supreme, often having more sway than senior faculty members. They decide whether you have worked enough to justify pay for a full consultation and when should you take your next competence examination. Wading through the process that keeps them happy takes time and efforts. These trying circumstances seem to act adversely on the well-being of the physicians; which is a prerequisite for the
healer in him to manifest. If the physician himself is wounded, he cannot be expected to heal others well, though he may treat them.

We have been busy portraying our victories and the larger than life image of medical marvels has taken firm roots in the society, hence expectations have become formidable. People have come to believe, more than ever, that good results are mandatory and anything less is the doctor’s fault. Our own pretentious interaction with the non-medical sections of the society has come back to bite us. Dr Google, the big brother, has helped provide the ideal scenarios, to be compared and contrasted with real life happenings. These aspects are keeping us tied down to ‘the evidence’ and our minds occupied with being technically correct, rather than being humane.

It seems that these factors have worked against the expression of healer within physicians. The total belief in science, pursuit of evidence based medicine, individualistic ideas of progress, reduced autonomy of the doctor and rising social expectations have together been responsible for the paradigm shift.

It is indeed the healer element, which separates us from other professionals. We need to enhance it in our medical training and practices, incorporating it early in the medical curricula and assessing periodically. Healing is an independent faculty which develops separately. Healer’s work starts along with the scientist’s, but continues much further and beyond. Healer makes the sufferer realize that the damage cannot be undone but that it does not control their lives, and that the healer is with them in that process. As biological progress in human life cycle and the related suffering can hardly be expected to change, we have to focus on training the workforce to be healers as well as scientists.

Healer will have to be brought back to life. Please revive him from within you.