

# The Importance of People

Column Editor: Richard L. Henderson

Contributor: Stephen Abrahamson

*Another of our friends, responding to our question, "What in Education burns you up?" is STEPHEN ABRAHAMSON. Most of us in teaching yearn mightily for professional status, and we sometimes point enviously to the loftiness of the eminence achieved by the physician. And yet, says Steve, can you imagine as highly unlikely a scene as this taking place in the doctors' lounge of a hospital?*

## Let's Get Professional

DR. HOLMES entered the room, crossed to an empty chair, sank in it dispiritedly, and sighed mightily. He took a moment to look around the room and noticed Dr. Harris idly leafing through a recent issue of *Life*. Over in the corner he saw Dr. Klein alternately staring out the window and glancing at a medical journal in his lap. The only other person in the room was reclining in a chair, his legs stretched out and his head at an uncomfortable angle.

"Boy," murmured Dr. Holmes, "am I bushed!"

Dr. Harris looked over the top of the *Life* he was reading and Dr. Klein put aside the medical journal that had been open in his lap. Both assumed an air of listening as Holmes continued. "It's that miserable gang in Ward C. They just don't appreciate anything you do for them."

The two others nodded sympathetically. "What is it this time?" asked Harris.

"Well," responded Holmes, "have you noticed that patients today don't respond to treatment the way that patients used to? I can remember a time when every patient I treated appreciated what I did for him and began to get better almost

immediately. Just compare that to patients today—why, some of those characters in Ward C look to me as if they never *will* get better—and after all I've done for them, too. What is the matter with patients today, anyway?"

The other two considered the question for a moment or two. "I'll tell you what I think," answered Klein. "I think they do it deliberately. They just don't care. You can't tell me that a simple bone graft shouldn't fuse within three months. Why that Sue Burkhardt—you remember her, don't you, Bill; she's the one who gave you trouble last year when she wouldn't respond to the X-ray treatments you gave her for that rash on her hands?" Klein paused long enough to get an affirmative nod from Harris. "That Burkhardt woman has been here several months and I can't see that she's getting any better at all."

At that moment, the recumbent figure stirred, looked at his watch, and groaned. "Another clinical conference in five minutes. God, I just live for the week ends! For the life of me I don't see what earthly good it does for us to have to sit and listen to the big-shots pontificate about routine cases." Reluctantly, he pulled

himself out of the chair and walked dejectedly out of the door.

The others looked after him as he left. "Joe has been slipping, I think," said Harris. "He lets his patients get away with all sorts of things. That makes it bad for the rest of us when we try to maintain a little discipline and order. Why, the other day . . ."

At that moment the door opened and a youngish man with an intent look walked in. He smiled a tentative hello and, amid a waiting silence, looked through the journals on the coffee table, muttered, "That's the one," took it and walked out.

"That's the new fellow in pathology, isn't it?" asked Holmes.

"That's the guy," answered Klein. "A real eager beaver." He looked out of the window for a moment before continuing. "He'll get over it, though; they all do. I wonder why the hell the medical schools fill the boys with so much rot these days . . . just a lot of theory with no more idea of what a patient is really like or what a hospital is really like than I don't know what."

"Yes," chimed in Holmes, "then they come in here and try to tell us how to do things . . ."

"Or what's worse," interrupted Klein, "how some ivory-tower professor thinks they ought to be done!" All three nodded as Klein continued, "How is it possible for medical school professors to lose touch so completely and give out all that guff in their classes? Maybe," he added after a slight pause following the rhetorical question, "they never were in touch at all. It wouldn't surprise me to find that old Professor Halliday never has had an honest day's experience in his whole professional life. Their damned theories just kill me."

"Yes, and the way they insist that we ought to read this tripe." Harris waved a

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medical journal at the other two. "I suppose there's a lot of truth to that old gag, 'Those who can't practice medicine teach others to practice medicine and those who can't teach medicine write articles about medicine and the practice of medicine.'" The others chuckled wryly and appreciatively. "But to get back," put in Holmes, "to what I was saying when I came in, don't you agree with me that patients today just have no respect for the doctor?"

"There's no question about it," agreed Harris, "and after all of our sacrifices to become physicians; the years of study, the time we put in, the total disregard we're expected to have for our own lives, the nervous strain we're under. I sometimes wonder why the hell I ever stick it out."

"And there's something else: I made a special effort," Holmes persisted, "to get up to see my patients in Ward C yesterday but I was out on an emergency case

all day. Do you know that they complained because I hadn't been there yesterday? Don't they have any consideration for us at all?"

"None at all," pronounced Klein, shaking his head dolefully. "I just don't see why their families haven't succeeded in teaching them some respect for physicians." He paused. Then he went on, "When I was a boy, our hometown doctor was the most respected and revered man in the town . . . but today, well!"

The others nodded sympathetically and Klein finished by saying, "Modern parents just don't teach their kids respect any more. Those patients in Ward C are a perfect example of loose up-bringing and what it can do."

"What are we going to do about all this?" asked Holmes.

"I'll tell you one thing we have to do," responded Harris. "I think we have to group the patients: those that do respond and those that don't. After all, we can't keep penalizing the patients that would respond if only they had the chance."

The others nodded. "Or," mused Klein, "maybe we have to go back to the time

when not everybody got medical care—they didn't have problems like this in those days. Maybe we have to say that patients who don't respond to treatment will be excluded from the hospital . . . after a fair trial, of course," he added. "In that way, we can best serve the goals of our society, giving help to those who benefit by the experience. After all, a physician can do just so much in a day and it seems a shame to waste time on patients who don't appreciate it and who don't respond."

"Amen to that," put in Holmes. Just then, almost as if by common agreement, the three stood up. "Well, boys, I guess it's time—back to the old grind. Remember, only two more days this week." With that, they walked out of the room. On the door which closed behind them was lettered the sign:

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ONLY

—STEPHEN ABRAHAMSON, *associate professor of education and director, Educational Research Center, The University of Buffalo, Buffalo, N. Y.*

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### Correction

In "The Importance of People" column in the October issue of *EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP*, the authorship of a review of a new book on social studies by Michaelis was erroneously ascribed to the editor of the *Bulletin* of the Council for Basic Education (Bulletin Number 12, July, 1957).

The review was written by Dr. J. C. Hutchinson, chairman of history and social science at the New Jersey State Teachers College in Newark. The editor of *EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP* and the column editor of "The Importance of People" apologize for this error and are glad to publish this correction.

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