

AUSTRALIAN MEDICAL ASSOCIATION CONGRESS
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Speech by the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. R.G. Menzies

Sir,

If there is one thing a politician likes to be it is safe. Those of you who are not politicians wouldn't understand that. But what I mean is that this meeting has, so far as I can make out tonight, been open for at least two or three days. Therefore I run no risk of a Censure motion if I now declare it open. (Laughter)

There is another thing that I would like to say to you and that is that I compliment, if I may, Dr. Colville a man of eminence from my electorate (Laughter) on having been elected as the first President of the Australian Medical Association; and I am delighted to think that he should succeed, not technically but substantially, Sir Henry, about whom all I want to say is this: that I think my grandchildren will be inclined to boast that 'granpa knew him'. (Applause)

Now having said that I want to tell you that I have a slight grievance; and the grievance is that, as so many of you may have found in your time, I find myself naked before the medical profession. (Laughter) I have stood in this lovely Hall (Bonython) more than once - indeed once I was counted out much to my pleasure (Laughter) - wearing the garments appropriate to the unearned honours that I have acquired in my life. Tonight here I am, you know, looking like a well-fed penguin (Laughter) while all the rest of them are here manifesting themselves in robes of glory. And I don't think this is right, because I would have you know, ladies and gentlemen, that I am, for some reason that escapes me, a Fellow of the Royal Australian College of Physicians (Laughter)(Applause) - not that I have ever noticed any fiscal results of such a position; and, what is more remarkable is that I am, I'm happy to say, as I was astonished to discover, a Fellow of the Royal College of Gynaecologists. (Laughter)(Applause) Now you would think, wouldn't you, that a man with these all-round qualifications (Laughter) would have been given a bit of coloured something or other (Laughter) to wear tonight? No. The medical profession, having been cross-examined by the lawyers so successfully for so many years, is jealous of us and so they said tonight "Who is this fellow?" "Well he's the Prime Minister". "What was he in private life?" Somebody generously said "A lawyer" and the result was that they all said "Let him stand up undecorated". Take your coat off, Sir. Well I don't need to go beyond that point. So here I am.

But I stand here, not only as a species of lawyer, and as a species of Prime Minister, but as one of the millions and millions of people in the world who say "Thank God for the medical profession". It isn't so long ago that having - we don't have a 40 hour week in my job; nor do we have Saturday morning off - but it wasn't so long ago that having finished what I had set myself to do on Saturday afternoon in my office, a time of peace and quiet, the spirit moved me to have a look at the Year Book. Have any of you ever read the Year Book? I'm astonished at the illiteracy of people. How many people read the Year Book? Only the people who want to confound me, in my experience. But I read the Year Book and then I went back and I picked up one many years ago - I won't tell you how many years ago - in order to find out what the expectation of life of a male child was in the year in which I was born. You may think that this exhibited a melancholy state of mind, but it didn't really, because I found out that in the course of this relatively brief span of years the expectation of life had gone up by 16 years. And, may I say to you, rather more in the case of women. (Laughter). Now whether that is purely a psychological factor or not, I don't know. But there it is - 15, 16, 17 years.

We take all these things for granted, don't we? If we happen to live longer than granpapa, we say, "Well, why not?" - rather attribute it to our own virtue. But I tell you that the great physical revolution in our time has been what the medical people have done, what the bio-chemists have done, what all the people have done who have been preserving human life, and extending it. This remarkable revolutionary fact is perhaps not very well known; and not very much appreciated. What we will some day owe to the medical profession is not yet known; but I think I know something of it myself.

So there you have medical science and the prolongation of the expectation of life. I have sometimes thought of it, Sir, in these terms; that in the last ten years it has become a rather macabre fashion to read and think and talk about sputniks, about the marvellous technological achievements of the people who develop propellants and who send things whizzing around above the atmosphere. And no doubt these are marvellous things. But I would like every human being to remember that of all the people who have seen these flaming objects - and I'm not using that in the colloquial sense - passing across the low horizon at night, or all the people who have seen that, probably a third would not have been alive but for the immense work in medicine and research in our world. This is something that ought to be realised with clarity, and remembered with pride. Therefore I want to say that I am here because the medical profession has an immense claim on my mind and my gratitude, on your mind, and your gratitude.

It doesn't always get this recognition. I wouldn't like to go back too far, but in my earlier days, in my more respectable days at the Bar, I not infrequently appeared as Counsel for some wretched doctor who was accused of negligence - Oh, I could tell you story after story (Laughter) about this - and my heart was in it. Because, you know, it is one of the ironies of life that when we feel ill, when we feel off, when something happens to somebody in the family, the first man we turn to is the doctor: he brings with him an aura of skill and of knowledge - and for us, confidence. But if something goes wrong he is the first man to be attacked. Let us remember that.

This profession lives in the middle of life. It sees human nature at its worst - and, thank God, it sees human nature at its best. It becomes familiar with fright; it becomes familiar with courage. It becomes familiar with gratitude; it becomes familiar with thanklessness. I will never think of the medical profession as a profession in which men, having passed through a period of training, have a licence to earn agreeable incomes and that's that. Not at all. Any medical man who thinks of it in that sense may be medical - but he is not a great citizen.

But this Association has had in it, year after year after year in my own time, people of immense distinction, with an immense sense of responsibility, who have never thought of their profession except in terms of the country in which that profession serves. I have referred already tonight to a most famous man in this city, Sir Henry Newland, who deserves to be famous all over the world. I look down and I see not far ahead of me Sir Charles Sickeron Blackburn, the Chancellor of the University of Sydney, a man of immense distinction in the medical world who has been, year in and year out a magnificent and devoted servant of the people, and of the nation. These are great things.

Sir, speaking with all the inbred feelings of a lawyer, a man who loved the practice of the law and whose great regret is that he will never resume it, I just want to say that there are some aspects of the medical profession that have greatly concerned me in recent years. Cue I express in a most sympathetic fashion.

How can you today, with the vast accretions of knowledge in new techniques, and new branches of applied science, how can you compress a period of medical training within any reasonable period of time? This must be a tremendous problem. I can remember when I was an undergraduate it used to be said by people with high brows that 'really it was nonsense to think that the medical students weren't educated'. Well there is something to be said for that you know, if you look at it in that fashion. Why couldn't they do a year of Arts, or, as I would have thought much better, a year in Jurisprudence? Not medical jurisprudence: I don't think that would have done them any good. (Laughter) But anyhow why shouldn't they? Because at that time there was a disposition to think that within four years of technical teaching a man might encompass a medical degree. Well it's gone on, hasn't it? It stretches out. Not to the crack of doom, but it stretches out. I just don't know how you solve the problem, except by post-graduate instruction, of enabling a medical student to become a normally qualified medical practitioner when the boundaries of the knowledge that he must reach to are extending so tremendously every year. I don't solve that problem: I merely say that I think that I realise that it exists.

I have had, comparatively recently, another problem. There are teaching hospitals in Australia, hospitals which are conducting in clinical studies, in clinical teaching work that is properly considered the task of the universities. And as many of you know I have devoted a fair number of my declining years to doing something for the universities of this country. (Applause) So we establish a special committee, a very powerful committee, to consider the work of teaching hospitals. And I am happy to say that the last completed act before I left Parliament at the end of Thursday night, the last completed act was an Act to provide for grants from the Commonwealth in conjunction with the State Governments who have behaved magnificently on these matters, to encourage teaching hospitals in their capital equipment, and, when we resume in Parliament their recurrent expenditures. (Applause)

The only other thing, Sir, that I want to say to you is that I haven't yet reached the point of time at which I believe that the relationship between the doctor and his patient is purely objective, or scientific. I don't believe it. I don't believe it. The doctors who are here, they won't be interested in this, but the rest of us, isn't it a wonderful thing to have a man come in to see you whom you trust, whose judgment you respect? This has a therapy of its own. You can bring along some stranger, he may have all the gadgets in the world, he may do all these things - and they are vastly important - but I still remain of the opinion that there are few things to equal the therapeutic value of the confidence that the patient has in the doctor. This means that the personal relationship between the doctor and the patient must never be destroyed. (Applause)

My own Government has tried to recognise this by this rich voluntary element in what we do. But in particular I was interested, I was more than interested the other day when Sir Douglas arrived from New Zealand and had a word to say for the general practitioner. (Applause) Who am I to have a word to say against the specialists? I believe in the specialists. But the essence of medical practice, the whole sub-stratum of medical practice in our country, or in any other, is the general practitioner who knows the family, and who is known by them, who is wise, who doesn't attempt to go beyond his course, because there are some people who have special knowledge in this way or that, but who has a wise, rich, informed, experienced judgment which enables him to say "This is the position. If I need some more this is it. You must get it". We will fall into the most infinite calamities if we all become scientists, or things that are experimented about.

We must remain above all things human beings, because human beings, put all science on one side, still remain the most important thing in the world, don't they? This is it, human beings. If medicine, if the practice of medicine, were ever to become so detached that it became a mere matter of test tubes instead of an incidental matter of test tubes, then we would reach a stage of life in which much hope, much expectation, would go out of human lives; and a great deal of anguish would come into them.

So we think tonight of the marvellous things that have been done by the experts, the marvellous things that will be done, the superb work of the bio-chemists. I am the last man not to wish that in all these refined fields of research this country should do everything in its power to produce the result. And having said all that I just want to end up by saying to you "Thank God for the G.P. Thank God for the man who comes into the home and who gives it cheer and comfort and a ripe skill." And on all those grounds I am singularly honoured to declare this meeting open. (Applause)
