

Editorial

The behaviour of a doctor towards his patient is of extraordinary importance to society and to the doctor himself. When a person is ill he is at once perplexed by the problem of whether to go to a doctor or not. All men have learned from experience that most illnesses will get better if left alone. Yet men know that dangerous illnesses often begin with minor symptoms and that delay may lead to an unnecessarily long illness, permanent disability or death. It is probable that the decision to consult a doctor early or to refrain from doing so is taken according to the patient's past experience of doctors or to what he has heard about them from his friends. Delay, with all its risks, is often due to the patient's fear that he will be treated indifferently, to fear of disclosing secrets to a man he cannot trust, to fear of being treated in a way harmful to him, in the doctor's interests and not in his own. One might say therefore, that a doctor's good behaviour is an important factor in preventing disease because it enables early diagnosis to be achieved and early treatment to be started.

The Malayan Medical Association, in common with similar associations in the world, demands of its members a good deal more than gentleness and good manners, even though these are very important. Gentleness and good manners are nearly always genuine, naturally present as part of a doctor's character or ingrained into him during his training. But they are also highly developed by confidence tricksters and other scoundrels. A code of medical ethics is a necessary addition to them. Such codes have existed from ancient times. For instance, cut in the stone of the Style of Hammurabi four thousand years ago, are the laws of Babylon which include those governing the conduct of physicians, the fees they were allowed to charge and the severe penalties inflicted on them should they do wrong. The modern doctor may be appalled at the very heavy damages awarded in the courts against doctors for negligence. In ancient Babylon, if your patient died you ran the risk of having your fingers cut off, to encourage you to do better next time. Hippocrates, two thousand four hundred years ago, wrote the famous oath. This oath binds the physician to act in his patient's interest and for the honour of the medical profession. No penalties are mentioned. The doctor is to act in such a way as will be pleasing to the gods. In this oath there is an important omission. The demands made by the State and the Law nowadays were simply ignored by Hippocrates. A doctor's duty was to his patient and to his profession. No other considerations applied.

Our Association is now investigating the whole question of medical ethics as we would like them to be observed in Malaya. A doctor's behaviour is the concern of the medical profession. His actions are often taken by the general public to be typical of the character of us all. Some

time ago accusations of misbehaviour were made against one or two consultants in Singapore. Reports in the newspapers, to avoid mentioning names, simply applied these accusations as if they were proven facts to the body of consultants en masse. Men who had worked hard and honourably in the service of the people of that city found themselves classified in the press as little better than criminals. Such was the result of suspicions directed against not more than one consultant in twenty. We expect this sort of thing to occur again. By establishing an ethical code, of the highest possible standard, we hope to prevent or limit the incidence of such painful reporting. Our members must not only behave well but be clearly seen to behave well.

There is a rule in economics which states that bad currency will drive good currency out of circulation. To some degree this is true of bad behaviour. If there is no accepted code of ethics then there will be danger that deterioration in the behaviour of doctors will occur. This would have disastrous consequences to the reputations of all of us, whether virtuous or not. The consequences to the people of Malaya would be equally serious. Nothing could be more dangerous to them, when ill or injured, than a loss of faith in their doctors.

A tourist in a certain country entered a large hotel. In the reception hall were a number of touts who tried to sell him various things and interest him in tours of local beauty spots and in other more dubious forms of entertainment. Among them was a man who thrust a doctor's card on the tourist. The tourist's reaction was to decide that if he had the misfortune to need medical attention, he would fly to some other country to get it. He would hope to find a medical profession there that did not demean itself by touting for business.

We may shudder at such behaviour from a doctor and applaud the tourist's good sense. But how does such a situation arise? It arises gradually. Small faults become accepted as normal. Serious misdeeds soon follow. In the end the whole profession is shamed in the public eye. A code of medical ethics points out the faults before they are committed. It influences doctors to behave well. It warns the weaker ones that certain specified actions will earn the distrust and disapproval of their colleagues. It helps to ensure that the patient's interests will be guarded and that he will be treated as a gentleman by a gentleman.