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Morals and the Medical Scientist

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The story is told that a man approached a group of artisans and inquired what they were doing. From one he received the answer that he was working for five francs a day; from another, that he was laying stones; but from the third, with luster in the man's eyes, that he was building a cathedral. I like to believe that the scene was Chartres and that this man with other kindred spirits brought into being that gem of architecture — the Cathedral of Chartres. There are many cathedrals and not all are built with luster in the man's eyes, that laying stones; but from the foundation but also its spires.

I approached a group of artisans and to them we owe not only the categorical or figurative structure of medicine. This too was built by artisans, many of whom worked merely to gain a livelihood while to others it meant the humdrum of a profession, but to a few who had vision, dedication and inspiration, the structure of medicine took form and to them we owe not only the foundation but also its spires.

What about the rules of conduct or code of morals for these builders we now call medical scientists? Like all men they are first of all human beings with the same basic instincts and weaknesses in which greed and stupidity often dominate, but they are also endowed with idealism. Many are keenly aware of the privilege of working in a field that can add to human happiness by alleviating suffering, improving health and saving lives. Like the artisan of the story who recognized his good fortune in building a cathedral instead of a bull ring or massive fortress, so the medical scientist should realize his privilege and his obligations. He owes to society this opportunity and one of the best means to repay his debt is to seek truth unselfishly and without compromise. How beautifully this is illustrated by Gregor Mendel, who painstakingly from a single experiment of growing peas and after careful observations with the meticulousness recorded, deduced the theory of heredity that bears his name. It is doubtful whether he gave any thought to the potential value of his work.

Though the aim of medical research need not be practical, one can justifiably question the morality of eschewing any medical study that might lead to results which would help mankind. This attitude is expressed by a well-known scientist: "For many years before World War II we were very proud of the fact that we were working on problems that seemed to have no practical relation to medicine whatever." One may ask why he was proud because it had no practical value — even Nobel prizes have been given for practical contributions. In addition to pure science may come superior thinking but it may also be a fetish that blinds one to the needs of humanity.

Not all great advances of science were made by mental giants such as Pasteur. Dr. Quick is Professor Emeritus of Biochemistry, Marquette University School of Medicine.

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mind, become, as Jenner expressed it, the "instrument" to a new concept that affects the welfare of mankind, present a special moral problem.

The medical scientist who has made a discovery or who has developed something that is of direct benefit to man has a moral duty to try making it available. Modesty under these circumstances is not a virtue. Perhaps this problem is most effectively illustrated by Semmelweis and Oliver Wendell Holmes. Both independently deduced the contagiousness of puerperal fever and both warned of the danger of transferring the contagious agent from the postmortem room to the woman in labor. The hostile opposition that these two men faced is history. Semmelweis fought for his idea literally with clenched fists and sleeves rolled up and died so to speak in the struggle. Holmes, a gentleman from Boston, wrote a learned paper and after vicious attacks by two great authorities from medical centers in Philadelphia wrote another paper, also in impeccable style and eloquent English, to defend his views whereupon he gave up his struggle. Women continued to die in childbed. Semmelweiss was dead and Holmes had become a famous literary figure. Yet it is said Holmes in his heart felt more...