
Diseases of the
COLON & RECTUM

Vol. 28

September 1985

No. 9

Presidential Address

Opportunity, Experience, Judgment—in Changing Times

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Marino AWM Jr. Presidential address: Opportunity, experience, judgment—in changing times. *Dis Colon Rectum* 1985;28:637-638.

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WELCOME to the 84th Annual Meeting of the American Society of Colon and Rectal Surgeons. I am honored, indeed, that you have permitted me to serve as your president during the past year. This marks my 28th meeting as a member, but the first time I remember attending was in 1933 in Chicago. I got a strong early impression that this was a very special organization, possibly because there was an international exposition: a magnificent World's Fair in Chicago that year. I must confess that the meeting and the grandeur of the Fair were completely interwoven in an 8-year-old's memory.

I still feel that this is a very special organization even today, and I must confess that the past year has increased my admiration for it and the wise leaders who founded, forged, guided and established the Society and the specialty of Colon and Rectal Surgery. As physicians and specialists in 1985, we can only benefit from their efforts because what they built for us is sound and solid. Because of this, I am certain that we can survive the turmoil of change that now threatens to engulf the profession of medicine.

In June of 1899, 15 proctologists met at the Chittenden Hotel in Columbus, Ohio, and founded the American Proctologic Society. The only purpose of their meeting was the dissemination of specialized knowledge; 13 of the 15 presented scientific papers. The rest is history. From this modest beginning, there has evolved a specialty organization that has produced an annual meeting with over 1300 registrants; a world-class journal, *Diseases of the Colon &*

Rectum, and 27 approved residency training programs, producing 50 graduates each year. It is only after passing the Qualifying Examination of the American Board of Surgery that these candidates become eligible to sit for the examination of the American Board of Colon and Rectal Surgery.

Not many of us here in this room can appreciate the great effort, wisdom, patience, perseverance, individual sacrifice, and even anguish that went into building what we take for granted today. In 1981, President Malcolm Veidenheimer titled his final address "Who Dug Your Well?" and left us with the thought that when we are enjoying the sweet water, we should remember who provided it for us.

In a similar vein, Stuart Quan, in his remarks as outgoing president in 1980, suggested that we "Ask Not What Your Society Can Do..." His strong plea for active participation by the members did not fall upon deaf ears. I am proud and delighted to report that the membership of this Society has responded willingly to each and every request of the Officers and Council for committee work and any other societal activity that was necessary.

There are so many meetings that must be monitored, so many issues that must be studied, and so many matters in dispute that must be evaluated that more and more involvement of the members has become unavoidable. I've been greatly concerned about asking busy surgeons to take on additional tasks. I need not have worried. Whatever was needed was done and done willingly and competently.

The whirlwind of change in American medicine continues. It seems that never before has there been such a concerted effort by outside agencies to change and control our profession. The government, the insurance industry,

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Read at the meeting of The American Society of Colon and Rectal Surgeons, San Diego, California, May 5 to 10, 1985.

and big business all want to tell us how to do our job: how to practice medicine. We are all aware of the crucial socio-economic issues and professional dilemmas that are being decided for us by others. Eventually, such issues must be faced by the profession, but some are better challenged by the larger umbrella organizations, such as the American College of Surgeons or the American Medical Association or state or county societies rather than by our specialty society.

I know that the American Society of Colon and Rectal Surgeons can represent the membership well in forums where specialty problems are at issue. Each of us, however, has a larger obligation, first to surgery as a whole and then to the profession of medicine as a whole. It is in these larger arenas that the battle for the future of medical practice is taking place. Tomorrow at 9:40 a.m. Dr. Claude Welch will address this audience. His topic is the future of American surgery. I have heard him speak on this before and I've had the privilege of previewing the address he has prepared especially for us. His perception of the problems and his suggestions for solutions richly deserve your full attention and meaningful consideration.

Some of you may recall the early warning that this Society received in 1978 in this same auditorium. Dr. Alex Castro's presidential address seven years ago was titled, "The Eternal Spiral." I will quote his opening paragraph: "A tornado, a devastating spiral, will uproot most everything in its path and bring it crashing down somewhere. Medicine finds itself in the midst of a tornado of bureaucracy, now spiraling as a political football to fall in the midst of chaos and diminished health benefits." How prescient is the thought expressed in these two sentences.

Dr. Castro called for a grass roots revolt by physicians and their patients to express disapproval of the way government was trying to interfere with and take over the practice of medicine. We listened—but did we learn? Seven years later the problems have compounded and the profession stands to lose even more.

In this time of revolutionary change, I will suggest a strategy for the preservation of independence in American medicine. Past experience must not be ignored. If those in positions of power seek violent change by proclaiming that methods of health care delivery that have worked well for generations are now improper, we must stand by our experience and publicize the facts. On the other hand, if the evidence indicates that change is desirable, then we should lead the struggle for efficient and compassionate

change. Medical leaders have an obligation to exercise careful judgment in guiding their constituents in the choice of alternative courses of action. Judgment may suggest modifications in the light of changing times so that only viable options are pursued.

Finally, every opportunity to improve medical care must be embraced. The philosophy, then, involves experience, judgment, and opportunity. I will recommend a three-pronged method for individual physicians who are willing to step forth and help: First, I recommend that the membership of the American Society of Colon and Rectal Surgeons continue their full support of the council and officers who, in turn, will represent the specialty to a host of peer societies and governmental and other agencies. You must alert the Society to events and decisions in your local area that you feel may be significant. The combination of broad experience and careful judgment will result in opportunity to advance the specialty of Colon and Rectal Surgery.

Second, I recommend that each of you participate actively in your county and state medical societies and through them, the American Medical Association. Too often, we hear physicians criticize the efforts and the policies of the AMA and organized medicine. I believe that strength is in unity and misplaced independence will be very deleterious. Third, I recommend that you support the American College of Surgeons, which is evolving as the voice and the conscience of the American surgeon. We may not agree with all the policies of the College, but it is the strongest voice with the most credibility that we have and it is the most likely voice to be heeded.

We all have the opportunity to use our experience and judgment as guides in considering those options that will be favorable to our patients and to the profession of medicine.

We are all familiar with the Oath of Hippocrates. I will leave you with the first principle or aphorism written by that same wise man:

Life is short
Art is long
Experience is uncertain
Judgment is difficult, and
Opportunity is fleeting.

Ladies and gentlemen—thank you for your kind attention, thank you for your support during the past years and in the changing times to come.