

Vol. 252, pp. 819-820, Aug. 10, 1984

Francis Peabody's "The Care of the Patient"*

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This [classic essay](#), with its fabric of pristine humanism, its universality, and its timelessness, embodies the noblest aspirations of the medical profession. Peabody gave his address at the Harvard Medical School during a course on the care of the patient. Dr Joseph Pratt (1) was in the audience and subsequently wrote: "After the lecture I talked with Dr. Peabody. His address doubtless made a deep impression on the audience but there was no evidence of unusual approval. In a few minutes the hall was emptied and we were alone." Since that day in 1926, Peabody's words have become a paradigm for all physicians.

On the Patient as Person

His essay covers three chief topics. The first is the importance of individualizing medical care. Long before the introduction of the SMAC 46 battery, to which so many patients are subjected even before they see their physician, Peabody cautioned the medical profession in the following words: "the essence of the practice of medicine is that it is an intensely personal matter.... The treatment of a disease may be entirely impersonal; the care of a patient must be completely personal. The significance of the intimate personal relationship between physician and patient cannot be too strongly emphasized, for in an extraordinarily large number of cases both diagnosis and treatment are directly dependent on it...." This philosophy was already deeply ingrained in Peabody while still a medical student. In 1906, addressing the Boylston Medical Society on the treatment of diabetes, he said: "We must not forget in treating diabetes that we are treating a man and not a disease" (2).

The following example bears out Peabody's message. A patient with cancer of the breast had great confidence in her oncologist. She was, however, concerned about metastases and was becoming increasingly depressed. Whenever she asked him a question about her illness, he would give her an answer based on statistical results both

His second concern is a call to awareness about the dehumanizing experience that so often accompanies hospitalization. Peabody displays remarkable insight into the forces that tend to depersonalize the patient who enters a hospital. He emphasizes the difficulties of getting to know the patient as an individual in a hospital setting. These features have been magnified during the past 60 years. As soon as a patient is registered in a medical center today, his entire past record and laboratory data can be obtained by punching the correct code into a computer. This, of course, provides invaluable information. The various teams of consul

communicating another important message regarding this subject to his audience by

(9) turn of phrase, "Medicine is no longer the laying on of hands, it is more like the reading of signals from machines." He certainly would have agreed also with Thomas' concern for the changing nature of the medical profession today. Writes Thomas, "If I were a medical student or an intern, just getting ready to begin, I would be apprehensive that my real job, caring for sick people, might soon be taken away, leaving me with the quite different occupation of looking after machines."

Peabody's scientific contributions were outstanding. Had he lived another few years, it is very possible that he would have shared with his friend Minot the Nobel Prize for the discovery of liver therapy for pernicious anemia. Nevertheless, his legacy to medicine is eternal. He was the compleat physician, clinical scientist, teacher, healer, counselor, confidant, and friend to his patients.

* A commentary on Peabody F: The care of the patient. *JAMA*