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LIFE AND ITS VALUE : A MEDICAL PERSPECTIVE

Practice of medicine and teaching graduate students in medicine are my vocations. I believe that this profession affords abundant opportunity for the observation of human behaviour and its varied manifestations. After all, the healing profession allows people in various states of distress to be scrutinised and the doctor interested in the human condition is in a unique position to appreciate nuances and think about the meaning and value of life. I shall portray some of the ideas that have struck me as rather important in the context of the title of this article.

Viewed purely from the biologic perspective, the fact that we are here is by statistical chance, against considerable odds. Millions of sperms compete for the same goal and one (or two if twins are to be born !) will succeed in fulfilling their biologic mission. It would appear that there is intense biologic competition and selection which determines who shall win in this frenzied race for life. Others might argue that there is already a predetermined plan and that we are here by the action of the able hands of destiny. Be that as it may, the fact remains that we will never really know by "Scientific standards", what factors determine the initial process of selection. But then again, science and its methods will not answer the many queries that bother Homo Sapiens throughout his or her life. Most of these questions are related to the realm of human behaviour and its oddities as well as problems of interpersonal relationships. It is here that social scientists and behavioural theorists are performing intensive studies, trying to categorise and predict the determinants of sociobiologic behaviour. While the medical doctor may not be well versed in these aspects of life, he is in a position to appreciate the meaning of health and illness and speculate on the significance of these in the overall context of the human life.

Considered in the light of the statistical odds against which human conception occurs, one would imagine that we should all

be jumping for joy all our lives, celebrating the very fact that we are indeed alive, and are here for a purpose. If one were to combine even a modest measure of celebration of awareness, that we are unique among living forms in being aware and able to think, we should all be truly and perpetually ecstatic! Yet, we see all around us no signs of this celebration, save for minor exceptions here and there far apart. As a medical professional, looking at people who are "ill" most of the time, one gets to know one very important aspect of life; that a lot of the value of life is taken away and wasted in being "ill". It is not that one becomes ill by choice, but a substantial proportion of human disease is related to two major, and often avoidable factors. These are psychosomatic illnesses and self injurious behaviour. Together, these form a large proportion of the burden of human illness and needless to say, take away from the joy of human illness and needless to say, take away from the joy of life.

In order to understand about illness, one has to appreciate the concept of health. Health can be defined in many ways, most of these definitions, alas, incomplete. Physical, emotional and social wellbeing are often stressed as integral parts of health. Yet, another truly important dimension is not mentioned sufficiently emphatically - namely the spiritual dimension. Among the important characteristics of a healthy human being are adaptability and flexibility, qualities that allow vicissitudes of life to be borne with fortitude and dignity. It is estimated that at any given time, about a third of the people who visit doctors in large hospitals and general practitioner's clinics are not suffering from any organic illness, but are responding to some stress in their lives in the form of somatic symptoms. These take many forms and various tests are done and found to be normal; the symptoms remain and later on it is found that emotional distress is at the root of the illness. These are collectively called psychosomatic illnesses. A large proportion of these are caused by problems in interpersonal relationships or a discrepancy between perception of "what ought to be" and "what is" in life. The growing intense competition throughout life for various opportunities further adds to the stress related diseases. While many of these people do continue to function, one tends to believe that they may not truly live to their full potential, burdened as they are by the long "illness." After looking at these patients for many years with

empathic eyes, I do believe that a strong family unit with emotionally supportive parents in childhood may help mitigate the problem.

Another matter for great concern that doctors and psychosocial workers face increasingly in contemporary society is that of self-injurious behaviour. The grades of these vary from addiction to tobacco and alcohol at one of the spectrum to attempted (and often successful) suicide at another. A healthy young man scarcely realises that the cigarettes he smokes with such gay may indeed cause very substantial illnesses. Little does he understand that the quality of life will be so badly mauled with these illnesses. One has to only make a round of any busy medical ward in a large hospital, and one will see a large number of people admitted for illnesses due to smoking tobacco or abuse of alcohol. If one adds to this the number of (mostly) young people who attempt suicide for often seemingly trivial causes, and we end up with a lot of misery and morbidity. One can philosophically shrug one's shoulders in a helpless fashion but these questions remain – are these people celebrating life? Are they fulfilling to the extent possible the role that they envisaged for themselves when they were younger and presumably healthier? Where did things go wrong? Was it some trigger at crucial and vulnerable time that somehow started a habit, an addiction?

Clearly, some of the problems lie in the individual and others in the milieu in which he lives. For instance, the genetic basis of alcoholism is well documented now, at least in a proportion of victims. The environment also plays a dominant role. The experience of the West, particularly the United States is too vivid to need detailed chronicling; the steady erosion of the family unit and its consequences on children are said to be at the root of a large number of delinquent, violent youngsters and drug addicts. There is growing evidence that the same phenomenon may be happening in our country, where a strong family unit was a proud norm in the past. Unfair competition, unattainable goals, poor image of the elders in society which can hardly be called exemplary – all these add to frustration and often violence among youth. The medical man faces the end result of all these social phenomena in the form of psychosomatic illness or self-destructive attempts.

It is clear then, from the foregoing, that a large number of people in the community are suffering from problems that take away precious time from pursuit of better ideas, and nobler goals. One's capability to lead a fuller and richer life is curtailed by the types of problems that have been narrated. Added to this, there is the greater dimension of a materialistic approach to life, which might stealthily creep into many lives and remain forever! This is a social illness in itself, but rarely acknowledged as such. In fact, contemporary society largely encourages this trend; nowhere else is it so vividly (and often crudely) encountered as in Western world, where success is generally measured by pecuniary gains one achieves in life. The current 'culture' of wealth accumulation as the main goal of political persons in our country is another glaring example of mistaken values and its ravages.

What do we do to mitigate all this? Where do we start? Will it be possible at all to inculcate values and attitudes that will stem the tide and turn us towards more intellectually stimulating and fulfilling lives? While it would be rather simplistic to think that there are any easy answers to these questions, I do believe that a true beginning can be made if we look at the nidus of origin of the behavioural patterns as the fundamental family unit. The experience of the West has poignantly told us that the poorly supportive family units have led to increasing problems; we do not have to learn it all over again. It is essential for us to try and start understanding that adequate and affectionate parenting is absolutely essential. Equally important, there is need for a sea change in us; a change towards considerable introspection and attempts to set exemplary, altruistic images before our children. We owe this to future generations.

I have perhaps sounded rather negativistic and gloomy; but there is cause for abundant optimism too. There is growing evidence that man is becoming more inclined to spirituality and the present phase of self-centred material pursuits may be a passing one. The man of the future may indeed be what we have utterly failed to become. He may be spiritualistic in all senses of the term, caring and sharing the resources at his disposal and joyous at all times, even in the face of vicissitudes. This may look like a distant dream, but therein lies the ultimate hope for mankind - fully led lives, without taking away from human potential.