

'HIPPOCRATIC OATH' AT CAPE TOWN

The 2,300-years-old Hippocratic Oath is the prototype of many oaths and declarations to which medical practitioners have been required to subscribe on admission to the medical profession in various parts of the world in ancient and modern times. Medical graduands are today commonly called on to subscribe to an oath or declaration by their respective universities before admission to their qualifying degree.

The University of Cape Town prescribes a declaration of this kind which it has hitherto been the practice for the M.B., Ch.B. graduands to make in an informal manner before the Principal and Registrar at the university office. This year, at the instance of the Medical Students' Council, the University held a more formal ceremony in the Medical School, Observatory, Cape. This took place on 12 December 1957, when Prof. R. W. James, the Vice-Chancellor and Acting Principal presided, supported by the Registrar and the professorial staff of the Faculty of Medicine.

After the Vice-Chancellor and Dr. A. W. S. Sichel had addressed the meeting, the 1957 M.B., Ch.B. graduands affirmed the declaration prescribed by the University and then individually subscribed to the declaration, which is in the following terms:

'I, . . . , solemnly declare that as a graduate in medicine of the University of Cape Town, I will exercise my profession to the best of my knowledge and ability, for the good of all persons whose health may be placed in my care, and for the public weal; that I will hold in due regard the honourable traditions and obligations of the medical profession, and will do nothing inconsistent therewith; and that I will be loyal to the University and endeavour to promote its welfare and maintain its reputation.'

The graduands then voluntarily affirmed the Declaration of Geneva. This declaration, which was adopted by the World Medical Association in 1948, and is regarded as embodying in modern form the spirit of the traditional Hippocratic Oath, is in the following terms:

'At the time of being admitted as a member of the medical profession—I solemnly pledge myself to consecrate my life to the service of humanity;

I will give my teachers the respect and gratitude which is their due;

I will practise my profession with conscience and dignity; The health of my patient will be my first consideration;

I will respect the secrets which are confided in me;

I will maintain by all the means in my power, the honour and the noble traditions of the medical profession;

I will not permit considerations of religion, nationality, race, party, politics or social standing to intervene between my duty and my patient;

I will maintain the utmost respect for human life, from the time of conception; even under threat, I will not use my medical knowledge contrary to the laws of humanity.

I make these promises solemnly, freely and upon my honour.'

The meeting concluded with an address by Mr. J. Katz, 1957 Final Year Class Representative. The assembly stood during the entrance and retreat of the Vice-Chancellor and his platform supporters.

DR. SICHEL'S ADDRESS

Dr. A. W. S. Sichel's address was as follows:

It is a privilege and a pleasure to have been invited to address you on this occasion when, after 6 years' hard labour, you are about to have conferred on you the degree of Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery of the University of Cape Town. It is an occasion which your Acting Principal has described as a solemn one.

Your Medical School was the first to be established in the Union of South Africa and has during the past 40 years built up a prestige and tradition to which you must constantly endeavour to live up. It has a reputation which will bear comparison with any other medical school in the world.

You have still one year of internship to do, a period of further study imposed by the South African Medical and Dental Council for your own good, but particularly in the interests of the public. You will now have an opportunity to put into effect what you have learnt, but under supervision.

When your medical education has been completed you will emerge as fully-fledged doctors, free to act and think for yourselves subject to the laws of the land, the code of ethics prescribed by the Medical Council, and the Hippocratic Oath.

General Practice and Specialization

Many of you will enter general practice and it is to those of you who do that I address my remarks especially. Once in practice, crammed with book knowledge, you will have to revise or modify much of what you have been taught up to now. You have worked in a well-equipped and well-organized teaching hospital with extensive ancillary services. In practice you will find yourselves deprived of information served to you on a platter. You will have to rely on your own powers of observation and exercise your own judgment. You will work to some extent by trial and error and you will make mistakes. Do not take it amiss if I express the hope that you will make mistakes, for once you have made a mistake, you will never repeat it. Beware of the man who has never made a mistake, remembering that the best man is he who makes the fewest mistakes.

Do not hold exaggerated ideas of your own importance or assess your knowledge too high. Always be humble enough to seek advice from those competent to give it. Never be ashamed of your limitations, and when you get out of your depth try to get assistance. Your greatest asset will be common sense, something that you have not gleaned from text-books.

It may be that some of you already have decided to specialize or will have to come to a decision in the near future. In my opinion specialism today is being overdone, with the result that there is a

superabundance of young specialists in the large urban areas, which will lead to cut-throat competition in the struggle to make a livelihood. At the same time there are not enough general practitioners in the rural areas, partly owing to the fact that even general practitioners themselves tend to practise in the larger centres where amenities are more pleasant.

A false gap has been created between specialists and general practitioners because of an impression that the status of the general practitioner is lower. As a matter of fact general practice is really a form of specialism and a most difficult one at that.

The Medical Association

As one who has taken a very active part in the affairs of the Medical Association of South Africa I must take this opportunity

of doing some propaganda. In practice you will be confronted with many problems and difficulties. Do you wish to be lone wolves forced to fight your own battles as best you can, or will you combine with your colleagues in a concerted effort to attain your objectives and preserve your rights as individuals? There is only one body which exists as an organization to meet the circumstances, the Medical Association of South Africa, and I strongly advise every one of you to join its ranks; and when you become members do not sit back and complain that your membership seems to mean nothing, but take an active part in its affairs.

In conclusion I wish you all good luck, health and happiness in your future career. Let common sense and fair play be your guiding stars and, if you can, leaven them with humour.