

THE VALUE OF THE MEDICAL ASSOCIATION*

F. N. GILLWALD, *President, Orange Free State Goldfields Branch (M.A.S.A.), 1960*

The choice of a subject for a valedictory address is not always easy, but, luckily, recent events in this Branch have provided a ready-made theme.

This Branch is today officially one year old and has, I venture to say, conducted its affairs with efficiency and honour. The retiring Branch Council has set a high standard for its successors, and the incoming Council has a solid foundation on which to build. To conduct its affairs, heavy expenditure is incurred, and it became obvious at a very early stage that the most pressing internal problem



Dr. Gillwald

would be that of finance. Office expenditure, delegates, expenses and official functions all absorb money, but they are vital functions of the Branch. Do not forget that your Branch has exactly the same commitments as the older Branches which have had years to accumulate such funds as they possess. They were able to do this, in most cases, before the present rapidly increasing tempo of medical politics.

At one of our Quarterly General Meetings the proposal was adopted that a levy of R20.00 should be placed, for this one year only, on each member of the Branch, to avoid a recurrence of the cramping financial restrictions of the past year and the necessity of asking for

additional funds from time to time, especially on occasions such as this meeting. Now that the time has come when we must actually dig into our pockets, an outcry against the levy is heard from many quarters. In discussing the matter, one of the objectors asked, "What do I get *out* of the Medical Association?" Now, I think (and hope) that what he meant was "What extra do I get out of the Branch for this large amount of money you are asking?", because I find it difficult to understand why every medical practitioner of whatever category does not belong to the Association and actively support it. No sensible, thinking person can fail to see the advantages of having a nation-wide, unified body speaking for the whole profession and guarding its interests. In actual fact, non-members of the Association are being carried by the Association

and receive many of its benefits, particularly in the financial field.

However, they deprive themselves of many of the other advantages that come with membership of the Association, and I would like to list a few of these advantages that come readily to mind. These include the right to attend clinical and other meetings organized by the Association, culminating in the biennial Medical Congress, where the best that South Africa has to offer is on show and is strongly reinforced by overseas visitors who are leaders in their respective fields; the value of the *South African Medical Journal* with its scientific articles written mainly by South African doctors, its instructive editorials, its information on current trends in medical politics, and its advertising facilities; the opportunities of joining cheap 'group' insurance plans, the Professional Provident Society and other schemes aimed at providing additional security for members at the cheapest possible rates.

Other advantages are: participating membership of the Medical Services Plan, which we all hope will be able to extend its field of action rapidly throughout the country in the near future; the right of appeal to the Association in disputes with Medical Aid Societies and other organizations, and the vast experience available in the settlement of such disputes represented by the full-time secretarial staff in Cape Town and Pretoria; the protection offered by the Branch Ethical Committees (with their confidential methods of operation) against attacks, whether justified or not, by patients or others; the social activities of the Association, either those after more serious meetings, or the purely social, which represent an important advantage to members, allowing them to relax with colleagues, to meet old acquaintances, make new friends, and bring their wives into communal medical life in recognition of the assistance they give on so many occasions; and finally there is the Benevolent Fund which is there to help in times of great necessity.

From the wider view of the Medical Association, let us focus our vision on the Orange Free State Goldfields Branch. Does it justify the R20.00 we are asking from you? I think that the answer will always remain a personal one. Those who take an active part in the work of the Branch, meeting the problems and solving them, or taking them through the various levels and Groups until a solution is reached by one of the higher Committees or Councils, will, I think, find the money well spent. Those who support the Branch, but less actively, will have to decide whether the higher status, in medical eyes, of being an independent Branch, is worth while in terms of money. The voices of our representatives are now heard directly in the highest Councils, without the delays our previous status involved. We can speak of our problems with the

*Valedictory address, 4 March 1961.

authority of local knowledge, and have wider powers to deal with these problems without reference to or permission from any outside body. Surely these advantages are worth something?

Let those who feel that they get nothing out of the Association come to us and discuss their problems, air their grievances and show us where we can improve. The Medical Association desires to be all things to all its members, but each individual member sees only his own small sphere, and it is only by getting together and working together that the many different viewpoints can be correlated, unified and turned to the best advantage of the profession through the Association. Those who criticize the Association on one or another aspect have probably much justification, for the Association is far from perfect; it has made some sad errors in the past and will do so in the future. But the Association is trying to live up to Article 3 (a) of the Memorandum of Association, which states that the object of the Association is 'to promote the medical and allied sciences and to maintain the honour and interests of the medical profession'. It can most nearly attain this ideal if every practitioner in the country supports it actively, criticizes it constructively, and gets to know and understand its many problems.

Those members of this Branch, who do not see their way clear to paying the levy, need not feel bad about it if their convictions are sincere. There is no call for drastic protests in the way of resignations and so on. The Branch can manage somehow without their money, but it would really hate to lose their moral support. Therefore I trust that those who do not pay will make every effort to attend the General Meetings and other meetings to lend their voice to our deliberations, and possibly even find a place on the Branch Council or its committees. They can then see what the funds are for, so that they can decide for themselves whether the expenditure is worth while. If they do not agree, they can propose reasonable alternatives.

In these days of materialism, when the profession is threatened by lay control, when powerful financial and gubernatorial powers seek to remove our autonomy, our only strength lies in a strong Association, representing all the many branches of the profession. No medical practitioner can do without the Association, and the Association is weakened by every practitioner who is not a member, or by those members who are merely obstructive in their outlook.