

Being Conspicuous

Some people hate it; others thrive on it. The vast majority of the population would rather not be noticed outside the common herd, and they tend to remain in the background unless some really unavoidable circumstance forces them to come to the fore. Because there are various ways in which one can become conspicuous, the reactions of the individual who has been noticed and the general populace differ.

The most important person at a funeral is the corpse, and in times of yore the star figure at a public hanging was the prisoner. Such conspicuousness is seldom sought by anybody except the mentally sick. But to a lesser degree the man or woman who constantly has some or other ailment which deserves and demands sympathy, is trying to be conspicuous, albeit by means of self-confessed subnormality of some kind. Such persons cannot attain recognition through achievement, and therefore have to resort to negative attributes in order to be noticed. The goal, however, remains the same—to be conspicuous and not to be counted as merely one of the herd.

We say that someone was conspicuous by his absence, and regard it merely as a manner of speech, but very often such noticed absence was carefully considered and deliberate. The head of a state who does not put in an appearance at some or other national or international event, frequently stays away in order to be different and to make a point when his or her presence, because of a fairly low rating on the protocol scale, would go unnoticed.

At some stage during their clinical years, most medical students surreptitiously allow a stethoscope to protrude from a jacket pocket or deliberately

splash mercurochrome over their hands. Their seniors smile indulgently at such attempts to become conspicuous, for they recognise the techniques with bitter-sweet memory. It is only when such tendencies do not disappear with maturity that they are frowned upon, and in this respect the medical profession has the strictest code of all. We cannot bear publicity, especially if it is afforded a colleague, and we go to extreme lengths to ensure that no doctor shall be conspicuous.

Often the public, and especially the frustrated journalists, misread this desire to remain unnoticed, and regard it merely as an attempt to prevent one doctor from receiving more publicity, and therefore a bigger income, than the next. This is not so. The tendency to remain one of the crowd and semi-invisible is part of the tradition of our profession. We are the proverbial back-room boys; those who work as unseen as possible, getting on with the job while others shout and wave the flags. In this respect we have even allowed a new latitude within our ranks in this very strict attitude towards publicity. If there can truly be no accusation of financial gain, we tend to accept the fact that some of our colleagues must willy-nilly be conspicuous, whereas formerly such material considerations would not have entered into the argument.

To some extent this new permissive attitude towards being noticed is good and healthy, for we have at times over-reacted to the extent that the public has rightly regarded us as being ridiculous, but we must not easily allow our traditional reticence to be completely destroyed. No doctor needs to be conspicuous.

Die Aantal Dokters

Die Sekretaris van Statistiek het pas die voorlopige resultate van die sensusse van geneeshere en tandartse wat ten opsigte van die jaar 1972-1973 onderneem is, bekend gemaak. Dit is 'n interessante dokument, want daaruit blyk dit dat talle van ons vooropgestelde aanvaardings in verband met ons mediese mannekrag taamlik breed van die werklikheid verskil. Dit beklemtoon weer eens die eeuouere waarheid dat raaiwerk op 'n lukraakbasis een van die mees onbetroubare grondslae vir redenasie is.

Van die 11 691 persone wat op 30 Junie 1973 by die Geneeskundige Raad geregistreer was, kon 'n ruim 1 755 nie opgespoor word nie. Al die redes word nie aangegee nie maar dit is hoofsaaklik omdat die persone in die buiteland was of oorlede is. Ten tyde van die publikasie van die resultate het 631 geneeshere wat skynbaar wel beskikbaar is, nie hul opgawes ingedien nie. In dié opsig moet ons die Departement van Statistiek van harte gelukwens en hulle vra hoe hulle dit regkry, want as ons omsendbriewe met vraelyste aan die lede van die Mediese Vereniging stuur, is die oes veel skraler as dit, selfs wanneer die aangevraagde gegewens reëlreg met die inkomste of welsyn van die kollegas te doen het.

Een van die verrassendste bevindings wat uit hierdie voorlopige bekendmaking blyk, is dat daar bykans net soveel dokters in gesalarieerde betrekings is as in die privaatpraktyk. Die syfers is 4 515 privaat, teenoor 4 108 salaristrekkers. Ons kan al hoor hoe die voltydse geneeshere keel skoonmaak om hul stemme te verhef omdat die Mediese Vereniging dan kwansuis soveel minder aandag aan hul sake gee as aan die belange van die privaatsektor. In die eerste plek word hul belange beslis

nie as ondergeskik beskou nie, soos dit uit herhaalde publikasies van die onderhandelingsgeskiedenis duidelik blyk.¹ Maar wat nog meer belangrik is, waar is hierdie ewegetal salaristrekkers op ons komitees, ons Federale Raad en in ons takrade? Weliswaar word nie beweer dat die 4 108 gesalarieerdes almal voltydso so hul brood verdien nie, maar die feit bly staan dat die aantal wat nie suiwer in die privaatpraktyk werk nie, aansienlik hoër is as wat die meeste van ons vermoed het.

Voorts is daar insiggewende syfers oor die verhouding tussen die aantal spesialiste en huisartse. By benadering was daar omtrent 6 800 huisartse teenoor nagenoeg 2 500 spesialiste. Weer moet mens versigtig wees om nie verkeerde afleidings te maak nie. Dit beteken nie dat iedereen van die 6 800 wat nie 'n hoër spesialisgraad besit nie, aktief in die huisartspraktyk staan nie. Hierdie syfers reflekteer bloot die verhouding tussen die getalle met of sonder nagraadse opleiding. Die presiese aantal aktief praktiserende huisartse is nie so maklik uit die statistiek te bepaal nie.

Soos te verwagte met so 'n groot opname, is daar foute wat ingesluip het, en 'n paar van hulle is sommer met die eerste oogopslag of na oorlegpleging met die register van die Geneeskundige Raad te bespeur, maar miskien is dit in 'n mate te wyte aan die agterosse wat nog nie hul opgawes gepos het nie.

Een ding staan soos 'n paal bo water. Daar is omtrent 10 000 dokters wat in Suid-Afrika mediese dienste kan verskaf aan 'n totale bevolking van om en by 20 miljoen, en dit beteken harde werk. Ons kan met reg trots wees op die diens wat hierdie 10 000 lewer en hulle verdien ons steun en ons lof.

1. Editorial (1974): S. Afr. Med. J., 48, 1235.