

POINT

The Essential Covenant between Doctor and Patient

DR. JOHN PATRICK



IN THE ANCIENT WORLD, covenants were between disparate people or nations where the stronger promised support and the weaker promised loyalty. This used to be the underlying principle of medicine but nowadays it is dismissed as paternalistic. Undoubtedly it was abused by some doctors but I think we have thrown out the baby with the bath water.

The relationship between the doctor and the patient must always be unequal. Because of this inequality even apparently innocent requests by the doctor can be difficult for the patient to refuse. Pretending that the services we offer are no different from any other commercial activity does not solve the problem. We can operate as limited liability companies for some limited services, which will soon cease to be part of medicine as we have known it, becoming rather like the many technical supports we need to be a good doctor. The bureaucratic mindset wishes all activities to be understood like technical supports where detailed protocols for training and practicing techniques can be written down and used as a means of control. Robots are

already invading; some of them are barbaric humans, who use dehumanizing terms like “service provider” and “client” to displace the richly nuanced terms of doctor and patient. In management, they prefer “human resource allocation” to real names. George Orwell would not be surprised.

The temptation to avoid the real person behind the patient is always present because for over 400 years we have been practicing reduction in order to understand. It has been incredibly powerful as a tool for doing science but when patients are reduced to diagnoses, it is at the peril of the whole profession. What is being left out is important. For example, the fact that guilty behaviour has doubled or tripled as a cause of disease in my lifetime is not receiving the attention it warrants. You will search your textbooks in vain for the only solution the world has found for guilt - repentance. In a management protocol for internal medicine it does not exist. Repentance is not susceptible to reduction and is therefore an offence to bureaucratic controllers. Wendell Berry puts the problem this way:

To experience [life] is not

to figure it out or even to understand it, but to suffer it and rejoice in it as it is. In suffering it and rejoicing in it as it is, we know that we do not and cannot understand it completely. We know, moreover, that we do not wish to have it appropriated by somebody's claim to have understood it.... It is, as Blake said, holy. To think otherwise is to enslave life, and to make, not humanity, but a few humans its predictably inept masters. *Life is a Miracle* (p. 9)

The contractual medicine which allows hospitals to take seriously patient laments and kill them without involving their loved ones is already happening in Belgium. Doctors used to covenant with patients to be with them to death, to journey with them. There can be no billing category for such behaviour.

Twenty five hundred years ago, the Hippocratic physicians while confronting a culture where the killing of patients and exposure of the newborn were commonplace, decided that a new structure was needed. It began with the invocation of the gods because rationally you ought to be able to trust a doctor who fears judgment after death more than one who doesn't. It

understood that medicine is, at heart, a moral activity because in every interaction we should be helping patients decide what they ought to do. (Science has no contribution to make to such an understanding). It continued with an absolute commitment to the sanctity of life and recognized the need for the physician to have rights of conscience. These insights formed the practice of medicine until the late 19th century when ideological atheistic and utilitarian concepts displaced them. It has not been a good outcome. Ask the Russians who will tell you that Marxism destroyed trust and ethics. Marx recognized his indebtedness to Darwin.

The ascendancy of Darwin over Hippocrates has the unnoticed side effect of destroying the intellectual basis of individual ethics, which is not to say they have died but that we can no longer give a rational account of them. Rights talk will not suffice because without intrinsic rights rooted in a nature given by God, we will have predictable inept masters ruling over us. Our neighbours to the south are already facing a law which overrides traditional rights of conscience without even an apology. It's time to pray. 🙏

COUNTER POINT

Yes Pray, and Become What You Pray For

DR. DAN REILLY



MEN'S COURSES WILL foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead. But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change.
– Scrooge, *A Christmas Carol*

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a farmer who planted good seed in his field. But that night as the workers slept, his enemy came and planted weeds among the wheat, then slipped away. When the crop began to grow and produce grain, the weeds also grew. The farmer's workers went to him and said, 'Sir, the field where you planted that good seed is full of weeds! Where did they come from?' 'An enemy has done this!' the farmer exclaimed. 'Should we pull out the weeds?' they asked. 'No,' he replied, 'you'll uproot the wheat if you do. Let both grow together until the harvest. Then I will tell the harvesters to sort out the weeds, tie them into bundles, and burn them, and to put the wheat in the barn.'
– Jesus, Mathew 13:24-30

Once again Dr. Patrick has given us an excellent exploration of some of the dangerous ideas that one encounters when practicing medicine in Canada in 2014. And once again I find his generalizations don't fit

my experience as I practice this complex art of being a physician. Most of the bureaucrats that I interact with call me a doctor. They call those I care for patients. Their protocols have made my practice safer and more efficient while improving the care I provide patients. They fear Orwellian tendencies in our society even more than I do and remain staunchly opposed to euthanasia.

I do encounter the dehumanizing and reductionist thinking that Dr. Patrick speaks of. It is most disturbing when I see it in myself. He does me a great service in reminding me of where those thoughts come from and where they will lead medicine and me.

And so I follow his advice to pray. I pray that God will restore the idea of covenant to medicine, give medicine wise and Godly leadership, and bring everyone to a proper understanding of human worth. Sometimes that prayer is words spoken to God. Usually that prayer is actions taken to pursue those goals. Actions such as supervising students so they can see covenant medicine modeled, volunteering for leadership

positions, and treating others according to their worth in God's eyes.

Like the Jewish exiles in Babylon, we who believe that following Christ affects every aspect of life are a minority in a land whose worldview is hostile to our own. I am sure the Jewish exiles weren't surprised or scandalized when their Babylonian neighbors and rulers behaved in ways that contradicted what the Jews knew was right. Despite the hostility of the land, God commanded that the exiles build and settle and continue to live for God while also working for the good of, and praying for, the cities God had placed them in (Jer 29:4-7). Sometimes doing what was right in Babylon led to promotion to second in charge of the land and sometimes you slept with hungry lions or walked into furnaces.

Jesus warned us that while the kingdom of heaven is coming, we will encounter a mixed life with both good and bad and sometimes it will be hard to tell which is which. We encounter good and bad ideas and choices within ourselves, within the church, and in the world. Neither should surprise

us nor shock us.

We know covenant is the best approach to important relationships so we pursue covenant relationships. That idea needs to be nurtured within each of us, within the church, and throughout the profession of medicine. In the field of ideas there are weeds growing alongside that good plant. Dr. Patrick has a gift for pointing out the weeds. Every one of us benefit from the tour but our focus must remain on the wheat and how we grow it in our lives and communities.

Pray that relationships in medicine will remain covenantal then go and do covenant. Teach others how to do covenant. We will spend eternity in covenant with God and each other. Guard your heart against contractual understandings of relationships and reductionist approaches to understanding humans but don't let attention to these evils distract from the much more important work of nurturing the good. Non-covenantal ways of doing relationships are just weeds that will be collected and destroyed at the final harvest. 