

The Making, Breaking, and Renewal of a Surgeon-Scientist: A Personal Perspective of the Physician Crisis in America

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Prologue

Abraham Flexner issued his famous report that changed the course of medical education in the United States in 1910. Now, over one hundred years later, the medical profession, including its practitioners, teachers, and institutions, finds itself engaged in a deepening struggle of uncertainty, foreboding, and cynicism. The outcome of this struggle will likely determine the quality of medical care obtainable in the United States during the twenty-first century and beyond.

Medicine is a profession under siege from seemingly every direction. Many of its greatest institutions are on the brink of bankruptcy due to spiraling costs, declining reimbursements, increasing governmental and payor intrusion, and mismanagement. Practitioners are buckling under the burden of layer upon layer of regulation, much of which changes from year to year, or even month to month. Clinician–scientists are abandoning their laboratories under the crush of decreasing funding and increasing regulatory demands, and claims on their time related to the practice of medicine. They also face diminishing availability of American trainees interested in research and frustration in dealing with institutional, state and federal bureaucracy. Physicians and surgeons are under legal attack by ever-increasing legions of plaintiffs’ attorneys trolling the airways, phone directories, and newspapers for clients using slogans like “make them pay.” Many illustrious careers that took decades to build have disintegrated under the weight of a legal and governmental onslaught.

It’s obvious—even to the uninitiated layperson—the medical profession in America has sunk into crisis. Newspapers, airwaves, and blogs are filled with missives concerning assaults on the profession, addressing the ills of its institutions and the plight of individual physicians. What is often not clear, however—even to many medical professionals themselves—is the impact that these events have had on the lives and careers of real people. It is my sincere hope that the telling of my personal journey, from wide-eyed youth to shell-shocked physician–scientist to embattled department chairperson of one of the great medical schools in America, will increase understanding of the human costs of the turmoil that has invaded our glorious profession and stimulate concrete measures to halt this downward vortex.

I have no illusions of there being a consensus on remedies that I propose in the pages to follow, and hopefully even better remedies can be orchestrated. At the least, however, I hope the telling of my story, as well as those of some of my maligned colleagues, will stimulate discussion and efforts to address the concerns of those who, like me, truly love the medical profession and are deeply troubled by the signs of its demise.