

Lecture Vol. 10 Tab A (Pst. SG yrs) cover

Speech

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I was to address this group on two occasions – this one, just after George Bush had been elected President and the next time, just after he had failed to be re-elected. The problems of leadership facing the AMA were much greater on the second occasion than on this one.

I started with the dissatisfaction of patients with doctors, and doctors with patients – the old problem of the doctor/patient relationship. I made some predictions, which I was certain would have come to pass by now, as I write this in 2003. It was an either/or situation, but I guess we become bogged down, because neither one has happened and still could be imminent. I tried to face, head on, some of the problems that I see in medicine. We certainly have high expectations for medicine and health. Some of the problems stem from the fact that we put faith in new technologies, new pharmaceuticals, new surgical procedures, and we continue to have faith in what I call the “magic of medicine”. But, we aren’t always able to deliver.

Although I tried to illustrate what I said, I stuck pretty much to the main issue, such as guarding against letting our ethics be determined by our economics; rather than the other way around, facing the competition between advocates for children and the aged competing for a small piece of an ever-shrinking pie.

I also went into a recurring theme of mine that is a system of health care, which is distinguished by a virtual absence of self-regulation on the part of the providers of health care and also distinguished by the absence of natural marketplace control, such as competition in regard to price, and quality of service.

After what might have been a gloomy beginning, I spent the rest of my time extolling the benefits of medical practice and what unbridled opportunities people in medicine had to lead satisfactory lives and feel that their contributions were truly bringing people what they needed and making a difference in the system at the same time.

This was a good time to say these things because as I look back on the situation, the last time we were in a good position to really do something about the problems of medicine was in the early years of George Bush’s one-term presidency. The people to hear this message were the leadership of the largest organization of medical doctors any place in the world, and it seemed reasonable for a credible Surgeon General just re-entering the private sector after eight significant years on the job could have been a good combination.