

Of being doctors and mercenaries

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Article

New Sunday Times - 03/27/2005

THIS is the time of the year when tensions among youth and their families are high.

It is the time of the year when careers are being decided upon, which in turn depends on which course that must be applied for depending on one's interest.

This is no easy task because there are now scores of institutions of higher learning in the country offering thousands of courses.

Some are rather new and less known and, therefore, remain unpopular.

To some groups, however, no matter how many courses are available, they have made up their minds.

Normally, they are attracted to the professional courses, notably medicine, which makes admission very competitive and invariably leading to controversy.

The Ministry of Higher Education has taken steps to increase the number of places in public universities this time around.

Despite this, chances are the problems will not go away for the simple reason, that there are too many aspiring doctors out there.

And their reasons for wanting to be doctors could range from being truly committed to helping the sick to trying to secure a better future, and from peer pressure to parental pressure.

Whatever it is, what eventually counts is those who are "truly committed". This is because like all professions, the rate of success depends on the level of commitment one can give to the profession, especially in medicine.

In fact, commitment means not only working extra hours but also being compassionate.

This is a demand that does not respect fixed working hours because the sick cannot wait, and their family members are equally anxious.

At that moment in time, the attending medical professional is all that they have; sometimes he or she can make a difference between life and death.

We know many of such professionals, especially in the public sector. Clearly, many of them are overworked (relative to the pay cheques they receive compared with their counterparts in the private sector).

Yet they can still afford to smile and be compassionate, something money can't buy.

They are the true professionals that deserve all the respect, and are the role models that all would-be doctors must emulate.

But we also have met some of the different kind. Those when asked whether there is any other option in terms of treatment will reply: "You don't expect me to create miracles."

Or, the type who is eager to play God by pronouncing the "death" verdict a little too soon. Fortunately, we do not have many of them around.

In any case, there are enough grounds for concern because the two examples cited above are real. It happened to my mother not too long ago.

She was admitted to a private hospital, given the urgent nature of the problem. We would have lost her if not for another very dedicated medical consultant (who was then seven months pregnant).

Against all odds, she did all she could to treat my mother (whom she said reminded her of hers). Slowly but surely, by the grace of God, my mother recovered and has been enjoying a healthy life since.

Of course, in the final analysis, it is the question of *ajal* - but even it is so, the encounter with a medical professional need not be unnecessarily unpleasant or crude.

This may be an isolated case; but in such cases, one is all it takes. It is when we wish that commitment and compassion are the prerequisites of being a professional; only if there is a fool-proof way of separating the wheat from chaff.

Until then, my guess is that not too many of the would-be doctors will at the end of the end of day join the group of truly selfless professionals.

This is perhaps a biased view. But given how our public hospitals are still "bleeding" because of a shortage of medical professionals, one can't help but come to this rather simplistic conclusion.

And that is why only those who are committed count because in all probability, they are the ones who ones who will slick around in this public sector.

Those who are using the medical profession to have a more secure future will probably be the first to leave at the earliest opportunity.

After all not too many of them actually understand the amount of the sacrifice that is expected of a medical professional.

Our notion of the person in the white coat is more or less what we see on the television screen where everything is stage-managed in an insulated environment.

The real-life situation is much tougher and more complex. It is therefore, a mistake to extrapolate one's (parents included) ambition over some glamorous programmes on television.

My final word on this is that joining the medical profession is like joining the army.

Once enlisted, you have no choice but in fight the war — no matter where the battlefield is (read: rural posting, for example).

Again, using the army analogy, you can eventually opt out an be a mercenary, serving those who pay the highest.

But mercenaries fight not because they believe in the cause; they fight because of the money offered to them, the more the better.

And that makes a whole lot of difference to what is meant by commitment.

On this note, to all those who are planning a carrier, good luck in whatever you have committed to be, including being the mercenary, sooner or later.

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