

Being doctors and something more

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Article

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What did Albert Schweitzer, Norman Bethune and Ernesto Guevara have in common? No idea? Okay, how about Ibn Sina and Ungku Omar Ahmad?

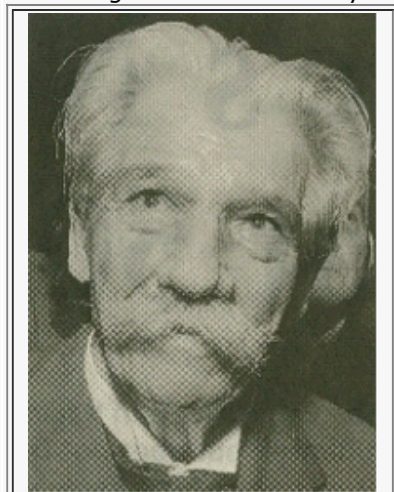
They were all legendary figures in medicine, though not normally regarded as heroes or icons by the medical fraternity. Still, they are highly exemplary doctors — unlike those who rarely touch our lives nowadays, as health gradually becomes big business.

Take, for example, Dr Albert Schweitzer. He was not only a doctor but also a humanitarian, philosopher, philanthropist and theologian; an accomplished musician with his masterly work on Bach. He studied at the University of Strasbourg and became a doctor in 1913.

However, he chose to devote his life in Lambarene, Gabon, West Africa. Together with the natives, he built and equipped a hospital using his income. The rest is history.

"Reverence for life" was his personal philosophy, which he believed was essential to the survival of civilisation.

In 1952, he received the Nobel Prize for peace and he was quoted as saying: "As far back as I can remember, the thought of all the misery in the world has been a source of pain to me."



Schweitzer: Nobel prize for peace

His Nobel Prize money was used to expand the hospital and to build a leper colony. He died in 1965 at the age of 90 and was buried in Lambarene.

Dr Norman Bethune, on the other hand, was widely known as an innovative thoracic surgeon and humanitarian.

Though a Canadian, it was in China that he is regarded as a hero; even a "martyr" referred to as *Pai-ch'iu-en*.

Bethune's spirit of absolute selflessness was recognised by no less than Chairman Mao Zedong himself. Mao, too, acknowledged his sacrifices and contributions as primary sources of inspiration in the new China.

Bethune demonstrated compassion and commitment to helping the less fortunate since his student days. At the University of Toronto, his education was interrupted when he volunteered to be a labourer-teacher at Frontier College (1911-12) and in 1915 served as a stretcher-bearer in World War I.

He completed his doctor of medicine in 1916 and became noted for his unorthodox but highly creative medical work.

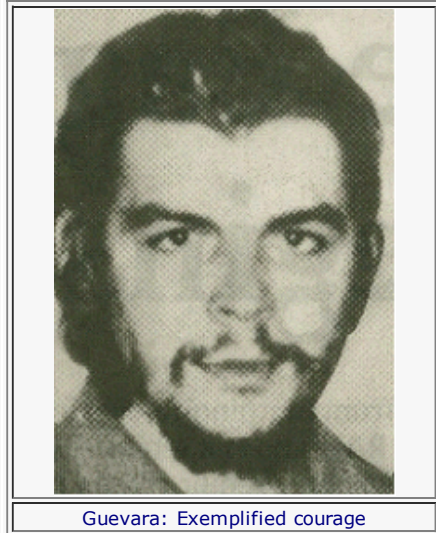
Reportedly, he developed, refined and invented new surgical techniques and instruments, many of which were later used by thoracic surgeons throughout Canada and in other countries.

Bethune died at the battlefield from blood poisoning on Nov 12, 1939 at the age of 49, following an accidental cut on his left hand with his scalpel during a barehanded operation on a soldier, because there were no surgical gloves.

He was buried in China. Next to his tomb, stands his statue, a pavilion, a museum, and a hospital dedicated to him. His family house in Ontario, Canada, is now a museum.

In a more intense way Dr Ernesto "Che" Guevara, also a revolutionary, statesman and soldier, similarly laid down his life fighting for the downtrodden, despite being an asthmatic. He was murdered in the jungles of

Bolivia in October 1967 at the age of 39.



Guevara: Exemplified courage

A testimony to the epic story of "Che" — the endearing term given to him — is the Time 100 listing as one of 20 Heroes and Icons "who exemplify courage, selflessness, exuberance and superhuman ability" from among 100 most important people of the last century.

(See <http://www.time.com/time/time100/heroes/profile/guevara01.html>).

As for the legendary Ibn Sina, he was refuted as a doctor by the age of 18. At the age of 21 he wrote his first book. He was also a philosopher, statesman, astronomer, soldier and often acted as resident doctor in many palaces.

In one incident, after having attended to the King of Bukhara, when asked what he wanted as a reward, Ibn Sina only requested for the use of the royal library, which stocked many rare and unique books.

Despite his busy medical practices, not surprisingly Ibn Sina completed more than 40 works on philosophy, medicine, theology, geometry, astronomy, metaphysics among others.

Some cited more than 90 books including his most celebrated Arabic poem which describes the descent of the soul into the body from the higher sphere.

For 500 years, from the 12th-17th century, his book, the *Qanun* (The Canon of Medicine), served as a medical resource in the West, where he is better known as Avicenna.

In the words of the famous Dr William Osler, the *Qanun* has remained "a medical bible for a longer time than any other work".

The *Qanun* is said to have influenced others legends like Leonardo da Vinci. His other great work is the *Shifa* (The Book of Healing).

Ibn Sina died in 1037 after a life of great accomplishment at 58 years of age. Indeed, his wishes were: "I prefer a short life with width to a narrow one with length." Today, an impressive monument to his life and work stands outside Bukhara museum and his portrait hangs in many medical faculties worldwide.

Now let us turn to our own Dr Ungku Omar Ungku Ahmad, a surgeon, scholar, researcher and King's Scout.

After obtaining his medical degree in 1957, he worked as a researcher at the Institute of Medical Research in Kuala Lumpur. He later became its director.

Admitted into the Royal College of Physicians London and Royal College of Surgeons of England in 1962 as a pathologist, he obtained a PhD in Clinical Chemistry three years.

Ungku Omar was very concerned about the health of the people. His basic principle was "health is development — there is no development without health (*kesihatan itulah kemajuan — tak sihat manakan maju*)".

He argued that malnutrition is caused by poverty; poverty is caused by lack of knowledge and source of income. He also believed that the use of Bahasa Malaysia is important for the rural folk to increase their quality of life by making correct and informed decisions about health care. In fact, he suggested the establishment of an Islamic university, and also initiated the establishment of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia to redress some these issues.

Ungku Omar was also known as "Doktor Radio" because of his keen involvement in giving public education on health and science through Radio Malaysia.

He died on Feb 15, 1969 at the tender age of 38. As an exemplary medical doctor and a social conscience for the nation, an institute of higher learning, Politeknik Ungku Omar, was named after him.

Looking at these legendary medical icons as role models, can we hope to nurture more of such a breed of exemplary doctors? Are they set to be the likes of Dr Ungku Omar, if not Ibn Sina? Or are they just driven by the bottom line of the big business, yet again?

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