

Annual Address of the President of the State Medical Society of Wisconsin: Commercialism

C.S. Sheldon, MD

Editor's note: In this excerpt from the Annual Address of the President of the State Medical Society of Wisconsin 100 years ago, C.S. Sheldon, MD, addressed one of the same issues we face today—making money vs professional ideals. (WMJ, Volume 13, p 182, October 1914.)

It is true we cannot afford to make our profession wholly idealistic and altruistic. (This is a practical world, and we have to make a living, if possible.) But we can much less afford to make of it a mere trade, the main object of which is simply to make as much money as possible. I do not mean to intimate that these lower ideals are held by the profession as a whole, but here is a danger and a temptation against which we can not be on our guard too carefully.

This is a materialistic age, when money counts for much, and when much of it is needed to “keep the wolf from the door.” The financial situation seems often absolutely impelling, and the temptation is almost irresistible to forget everything else in supplying present needs. I need not enlarge upon the baleful effects of this tendency, both on the individual and the profession. We can not serve God and Mammon at the same time, and when Mammon holds the stage, all the better ideals go by the board. If this financial greed-

ness shall manifest itself very generally, whether in the shape of fee-splitting, commissions, excessive or unreasonable charges, unnecessary operations, or what not, we need not be surprised if the general public takes due notice and records its judgment.

I have laid stress upon this matter because I believe that the extreme and disproportionate emphasis which is so often placed upon the purely financial aspects of medical practice is fundamentally responsible for most of the criticism to which we are subjected. How this tendency can be corrected, with human nature unchanged, is hard to say. Our rapidly advancing educational standards and requirements ought to help in time, and they probably will. Meanwhile, a vigorous crusade in favor of higher professional ideals should be inaugurated all along the line; a campaign of education, in our medical schools, in our medical societies, and by our own personal influence and conduct.

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