

The crisis in the medical profession

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We have witnessed how the medical profession has been in a crisis for years. For decades, and more clearly since the beginning of this century, such deterioration has manifested in different ways.

The most obvious sign is perhaps the decline in the number of people choosing health-related professions. The World Economic Forum (Davos) recently made a clear statement on the lack of healthcare staff worldwide, particularly in low- and middle-income countries.¹

This problem, which has been developing for years, was concealed for some time by the pandemic. Such shocking crisis revalued the role of healthcare staff as never before. We all remember the applause to show gratitude to doctors every night during the pandemic emergency.

However, as soon as the pandemic was over, the problem returned with unusual force.

In Argentina, it is a known fact that it is becoming increasingly difficult to fill vacant positions, including those related to entering the medical residency system. In 2022, it was a shock to note how a prestigious pediatric residency program failed to cover almost all available positions.²

In addition, the demands for higher incomes and better working conditions are being voiced in many countries. What has occurred at the prestigious National Health Service (NHS) in the United Kingdom is probably a good example, with strikes launched by nurses, general practitioners,

and junior doctors, in a scenario that does not seem to have an easy solution.^{3,4}

What is the cause of the problem? Is it just a matter of money? Is it about deciding to have a better quality of life?

Why did people aspire to be a doctor in the past but not now? Why did doctors put up with so much in the past but not now?

I come from a family of physicians (grandfather, father, favorite uncle, brother, cousin, wife, daughter), so I can bring the perspective of someone who has witnessed, almost directly, changes in our profession over the past century (as a matter of fact, my grandfather graduated in 1923).

At this point, it is important to understand what were the motivations that led people to join the medical profession in the past. Altruism, social prestige, and financial reward are most likely to be the most obvious reasons (not necessarily in that order).⁵ In my personal case, we should add the “family business” factor, fairly common occurrence worldwide (a high proportion of those entering medical school are direct relatives of physicians).^{6,7}

Regarding altruism, I do not dare to pass judgment; I am not sure if the new generations are less altruistic or more selfish. Every day, we see young people embracing the most diverse causes with the same enthusiasm and self-sacrifice as in previous centuries.

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I am convinced that the medical profession is not as respected as it was 30 years ago. It is possible that the access to the information available to the general public nowadays is one of the reasons for this. Most likely, the damage to the doctor-patient relationship as a result of the “proletarianization of medicine” also played a role. Also, we should not forget all the initiatives that seek to limit and even detract from the central role of physicians, in rejection of a particular interpretation of the “medical hegemony.”⁸

The obvious loss of social prestige is depicted in various ways; the most evident is perhaps the high level of violence suffered by physicians at present, which my father and grandfather would not have even imagined. Over the past 25 years, the number of reports of assaults on physicians in the workplace has increased.⁹ From being a profession that even warring sides respected, it has become a common target of social discontent, even among those who seek their help.

Until the mid-20th century, the medical profession, like few others, was a clear path to social ascent. However, social values have changed, and prestige now seems to be rather related to mere economic success, power and “popularity.”

In the film *Jerry Maguire* (TriStar Pictures, 1996), Cuba Gooding Jr. played his memorable portrayal of Rod Tidwell, for which he won the Oscar for Best Supporting Actor. Tidwell kept saying “Show me the money!” as a way of responding to any job offer. And the reality is that physicians are seeing less and less money. Surely this reality varies greatly among countries, but the strikes in the United Kingdom, the sad present of Argentina, and even the unconscionable situation of Cuban doctors sent on missions that have been described as a “form of modern slavery”¹⁰ are a clear example of this phenomenon.

It is true that human development has generated health conditions that transcend medical action. Improved living conditions, vaccines, and healthier lifestyles have contributed to the population increasingly taking health for granted. This has led to an underrecognition of the role of physicians, resulting in lower salaries, more precarious work, and longer working hours.

This reality is particularly striking in pediatrics, a setting where, as never before, patients (their parents) defy the best medical judgment. Pediatricians face daily violence, their schedules are disrespected, and their fees are at the bottom of the pyramid.¹¹

Last but not least is the excessive responsibility that doctors face relative to many other members of society. In the case of children, pediatricians respond with our assets and even with our freedom in the face of possible errors that could cause harm to our patients. However, there are judges who can condemn a child by handing him over to murderous hands, or politicians who with their decisions can plunge thousands of children into poverty or exile, most of the time with no other sentence than social condemnation. In the two cases mentioned above it is possible, at least, to suspect incompetence, recklessness or negligence.

I cannot imagine how this situation will end; I just hope that, if my grandson ever becomes a doctor and editor of a scientific journal, he may publish an editorial on the subject that describes at least a more optimistic scenario. ■

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