

On the Doctor as a Teacher

R. Galen Hanson, PhD
Minneapolis, Minnesota

The reminder that "doctor" means teacher,¹ the realization that physicianhood is a composite of healer as well as scientist,² and the realism that patients are people rather than objects³ are among the awarenesses that lead to selection of Gilbert Highet's *The Art of Teaching* as a volume appropriate to the family physician's collection of ready references in clinical medicine. Most especially, Highet's discussion of *the person of the teacher*⁴ is appropriate as an invaluable sourcebook for the family physician who would seek to use him/herself as a therapeutic tool in the care of patients; it is this matter which is addressed here.

It is noteworthy that Highet, early in the "Preface" to *The Art of Teaching*, refers to it as a study of the *methods* of teaching⁵ and then — following a brief introduction — turns to the *person* of the teacher.⁴ The implicit assumption is that the *person* of the teacher is in and of itself a methodological reality.

The question is asked: what are among the distinguishing characteristics of a good teacher? In an extended and brilliant answer, replete with ramifications for physicianhood, it is indicated that a good teacher is typified by qualities as also by abilities. Among the former are: knowledge of the subject; affection for the subject; liking and understanding students; and, additional understandings.

It is in a discussion of such additional understandings that Highet focuses on an issue central to family medicine: the necessity of the teacher being a person of broad learning. "The good teacher," he argues, "is a man or woman of exceptionally wide and lively intellectual interests."⁶ In the thrust of this discussion of the teacher as a competent as well as a comfortable generalist, Highet identifies this breadth of learning as a base from which the teacher may make relevant his teaching. Emphasizing again the use of the person of the teacher, Highet speaks of the teacher making himself more relevant to the student.⁷ This, too, underscores a dimension of centrality for the physician who would address his work to all ages of persons in continuing, comprehensive care: a base of *adaptability* is a crucial personality characteristic for family medicine. What emerges in Highet, at a juncture in his discussion of the good teacher, is the profile of the teacher as adaptable instrument. Says he: "Nine

thousand times more pupils have learnt a difficult subject well because they felt the teacher's vitality and energy proved its value than because they chose the subject for its own sake."⁷ This thrust in Highet is congruent with a similar emphasis, applied to family medicine, in the significant study by Stephens⁸ in which *the doctor as a drug* and the art of patient management are profoundly delineated for their professional importance. Highet's *The Art of Teaching* and Stephens' journal article together should be carefully reviewed by persons active in the planning of workshops on the doctor as a teacher. And together, they may provide the family physician with vital background for individualized continuing education.

References

1. Shapiro I: Doctor means teacher. *J Med Educ* 26:125, 1951
2. Dimond EG: Educating the future physician: People entering medical schools today are selected according to scales weighted excessively toward nonhumanistic aptitudes. *Saturday Review/World* 1(3):52, 1973
3. Editorial: The ideal physician. *Am J Psychiatry* 132:281, 1975
4. Highet G: *The Art of Teaching*. New York, Vintage Books, 1954, pp 8-65
5. *Ibid*, p vii
6. *Ibid*, p 48
7. *Ibid*, p 50
8. Stephens GG: The intellectual basis of family practice. *J Fam Pract* 2:426, 1975

From the Department of Family Practice and Community Health, University of Minnesota Medical School, Minneapolis, Minnesota. Requests for reprints should be addressed to Dr. R. Galen Hanson, Department of Family Practice and Community Health, University of Minnesota Medical School, Box 381-Mayo, Room A-290 Mayo, Minneapolis, MN 55455.