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## Other Side of Moon

# What ails the practice of medicine: The Atlas has shrugged



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### ABSTRACT

Health-care providers are currently facing a huge challenge. At one end they are expending a huge amount of time and energies on health-care delivery including time spent on upgradation of their knowledge and skills (to remain abreast with the field and be able to provide state-of-art patient care), sometimes even at the expense of themselves and their families. On the other hand they are not receiving adequate re-imburement for their efforts. To compound the problem several “traders” have entered the profession who are well adept in the materialistic approach abandoning the ethics (which currently happens to be the flavor of society in general), giving a bad name to the whole profession and causing severe grief, embarrassment and even dis-illusion to an average physician. The solution to the problem may lie in weeding out these “black sheep” as also realization by the society that the whole profession should not be wrongly labeled, rather a hard toiling and a morally driven practioner should be given his/her due worth

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## 1. Introduction

The whole health-care industry is pivoted on patients' confidence that physicians possess a body of knowledge and skills which will culminate in the relief of their distress. Towards this end they repose not only trust and faith, invest in time and money but also hold their physicians in a certain esteem reserved for a very few individuals. On the other hand, this task of healing implicitly and/or explicitly imposes a moral stake on the physician. In other words medical professions exists because society believes that her health needs are to be met in a certain respect and therefore her willingness to grant a professional power and privilege in exchange for a commitment to serve selflessly.

## 2. Archeology of medical practice

The word “Profession” is derived from original Latin profiteor, the meaning of which is self-explanatory. Indeed, during the period of Renaissance and early modern era even Medical Profession was crowded with self-trained **Barber-Surgeons**, apothecaries, midwives, drug peddlers, and charlatans. Over a period of time, however, three changes occurred. First, its practioners took upto science in a big way; focusing on a systematic analysis of patients' symptoms in diagnosis, observation, experimentation and documentation. Second, the practioners of this profession publically made a strong and inseparable moral commitment that though medical practice may be a source of their living; they will strive to the utmost

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for the benefit of the patient and not be driven by mere desire for material wealth or personal aggrandizement. Finally, moving beyond the scope and confines of the law of the land, they agreed to a process of self-regulation (Hippocratic Oath, and later formation of Medical Councils). This way health field evolved from the Guild of Barbers and Surgeons to a Society of Medical Professionals (Doctors), different from any other profession and clearly distinguished from mere traders. Understandably, this process also led to separation of Medical Practitioners from Chemists (who in turn evolved from the apothecaries and formed a 'lower' class of doctors; less educated and less skilled) who sold drugs directly to the patients. Ever since (time of this "Social Contract") the medical profession has attracted the best of the talents; a certain class of intelligent, hardworking, ethically guided and socially oriented individuals who were motivated not by monetary aspects but prestige and security of their profession. These individuals were willing to spend numerous hours every day (even 12–16 h per day) for long periods of time (more than 12 years for cardiologist and even longer for interventional cardiologists) with a desire to train to achieve perfection in their profession (often not only at the expense of money and self but even their family). The only satisfaction being the prestige within the society, ensured merely by being a member of the profession.

However, the arrival of the modern era has led to a dramatic change in the value system of the society so much so that perhaps for the first time in recent history this profession is at cross-roads. Interestingly what its practitioners have lost is not the money (for which most of them anyway did not aspire for in the first place) but their esteem within the society: well exemplified by several examples simplest one being inability to get their wards even in decent schools because most didn't have enough money to pay for the kick-backs expected. But even that doesn't hurt as much as the fact that the society for which they were expected to make so many sacrifices became completely insensitive to their interests and started viewing them with suspicion and in many respects started treating them like lay criminals.

The genesis of all this can perhaps be traced to the paradigm shift in the thought process of humankind, the way in which the knowledge was acquired, which occurred somewhere around Baroque era. Essentially it meant shift in the way knowledge was predominantly acquired from searching for similitude or resemblances (integration) to that by comparison (differentiation).<sup>1</sup> In real world it meant beginning of supremacy of science over art. This in turn translated into Hobbesian shift in philosophy from natural law to the will of the sovereign and shift in the societal focus from duty to rights of an individual, from community service to generation of wealth. These formulations were taken up further by contemporary thinkers, like T.H. Green who emphasized that ownership and generation of wealth, rather than being immoral, actually led to ethical development, to the growth of the will and a sense of responsibility.<sup>2,3</sup> Consequently, money became synonymous with power, prestige and even success. In the bargain, the physicians particularly lacking in money power (unlike businessman, management graduates or even IT professionals) lost not only a lot of prestige in society but worse still seemingly lost the high moral ground that they

used to enjoy till quite recently. In similar vein the role of sovereign mutated from Protection of the Community to Protection of an individual; protection of his/her wealth. Thus individual rights became the fashion of the day (with not enough focus on responsibilities of an individual). Not surprisingly, the status of a physician in society has been downgraded from "Physician Philosopher" to "Health Care Provider" from "Custodian of Health" to a stakeholder in health issues. When many of us joined the medical profession we chose it for the respect it entailed along with some desire to be useful to the community; money being the least of priority (albeit financial stability to enable to carry out personal and family responsibilities was indeed expected, rather desired). However, over the course of time "Money has become God" and certainly stature within the society is now co-related with material wealth. Sociologically speaking, changes in one system would cause a change in the other. In other words, the workings of any institution (medical) do not have a philosophy independent of that of the society in which it functions. In context of health-care, the changes in society subtly led to change in the practice of medicine which changed from Parent Child Relationship to a mere "Health-Delivery Expert." Not surprisingly some rotten apples or black sheep in the herd started to move in the direction of personal wealth at all costs and with no qualms about ethics. Further, it is ironic that the people who have tried to regulate the physicians were not the most ethical people but some of the most ethically challenged components of the community, for example actors. It is hard to pick the worst of those moments, but the nadir was possibly reached when Chief Minister of Bihar commented "Physicians who are guilty of negligence towards poor shall have their hands chopped," reminiscent of some medieval era dictat. As a result of all this, physicians of old school actually feel cheated and it has led to a lot of confusion in their minds as to whether they chose the right profession at all.

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### 3. Why should profession of medicine not come under the ambit of other professions

The next logical question is that if so many evils have crept in the profession why should it not be treated like any other profession? Homo sapiens is the only specie which is aware of its own mortality. This is perhaps the biblical "Adam's Apple" or the "curse of knowledge." Psychologically, "Ontological Shock" or simply fear of death (whether they accept it or not) dominates the thought process of all humankind and colors all their deeds and interactions (unlike Freud's proposition). Generally, mankind deals with this psychological trauma by not thinking about it, "escaping from it" living in a grand amnesia so to speak. However, when they are diseased or when they face death, all human beings are forced to face this eventuality and medical professionals is in a unique position to exploit this human paranoia. In other words medical professionals see individuals when they are most vulnerable, most amenable to suggestion and it is easy for some unscrupulous individuals to exploit this situation for their own perceived good. Thus the importance of ethics and morality in medical profession and it is very important that only good

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