

**Convocation Address by Air Chief Marshal O.P. Mehra (Retd.), PVSM, Governor of Maharashtra on  
the occasion of NAMS Annual Conference on March 28, 1981**

Mr. President, Fellows of National Academy of Medical Sciences, Ladies and Gentlemen :

Coming as I do from an altogether different background and training, I am deeply conscious of the onerous task that confronts me in saying anything worthwhile to men of eminence belonging to the noblest of professions. I venture to make some observations as a layman and I do hope that you would take these in the spirit in which they are made and that you would, where you see wisdom, apply your minds to the problems I pose.

Your Academy has the unique distinction of having been inaugurated by no less a person than Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, one of the greatest sons of the country, an architect, who visualized a great future for India. He attached great importance to science and scientific research and believed that by harnessing science and technology we could progress rapidly and find solutions to many of our ills. Above all, he had immense faith in the capability of our people to deliver the goods. Concluding his speech at the inaugural function of your Academy Pt. Nehru said : *“I hope your Academy will stimulate the study and development of medical science in the country.”* Looking back at the two decades that have gone by since its inauguration, you can justifiably say that your Academy has, to a great extent, fulfilled his cherished hopes.

You are no doubt engaged in a number of useful activities. The large number of erudite lectures and discourses that you arrange every year help to advance the frontiers of knowledge in the medical field. The high standard of the examinations being conducted by the National Board of Examinations set up by your Academy have helped to bring about uniformity in the post-graduate medical education in the country and to improve its quality. The awards that you give to young scientists for their contribution to the advancement of knowledge is a source of great encouragement to them. The membership you confer upon distinguished scientists acts as an incentive for scientists to produce satisfying results. I know that your Academy is engaged in several other activities and that your members include some of the leading luminaries of the medical profession.

I think an occasion like this should be utilized for some introspection. Faced as we are today with the stupendous problems of development, ill-health, poverty, unemployment and deprivation should your Academy be content with the role it has been playing so far or should it play a more positive role in the practical application of medical sciences, which is one of your prime objects, to the teeming millions, the majority of whom are deprived and are living in remote villages and city slums devoid of even the rudimentary medical care? In this context I venture to suggest that you ask yourselves : *“What more can we and should do? What more can we give back to the society from which we have derived so much?”* It may not be unfair to say that collectively as a profession you can do a lot more for your country rather than reach out to all corners of the world to project your skills and competence.

Till very recently, food, clothing and shelter only were considered as basic necessities of life. In today's context these include health care and education. The citizens of some of the more advanced countries have the right to education and the right to health care. We are wedded to the ideal of a welfare state and all our efforts are directed to promoting the welfare of our people – not of a privileged few but each and every citizen.

Our country's greatest asset is its people. The country's progress, nay, its very survival depends upon the quality of its people. Education and health are the two most powerful instruments for enriching the quality of people. So, our primary aim is and should be to promote the welfare of our people through adequate provision of health and educational facilities. Has this or is it being done in adequate measure? You can answer this better than I can. In case the answer to my question is in

the negative, then the ball is squarely in your court as you cannot afford to live in ivory towers divorced from the realities of life and the problems which face the country.

Let us have look at the Indian scene. Nearly 80% of our people live in villages. They are mainly the farmers and landless labour who are the backbone of our agricultural production and economy. Their health and well being should be our primary concern as agricultural production which is the mainstay of our economy, depends on their health and well being. Unfortunately, in many of the villages even the barest minimum of the essential medical facilities are not available, even at a price.

We have only one doctor for every 4300 population as against one per 1200 in Great Britain and one per 500 in the USA and the USSR. The shortage of medical personnel is further aggravated by the uneven distribution of doctors in urban and rural areas – 75 per cent of the doctors practice in urban areas while only 25 per cent in rural areas. Thus there is hardly one doctor for every 20000 of the rural population. It may look strange but true that only 2.7 per cent of the villages have doctors trained in the modern system of medicine. Can we afford to perpetually permit such a state of affairs?

It is common knowledge that the country is spending large sums of money on training medical graduates. As I said earlier it is a fact that trained doctors by their thousands are seeking employment in countries like the UK, the USA and the Gulf States as also some of the African countries, partly on their own initiative and partly through inter-governmental agreements. Unfortunately, within the country the situation is that whilst progressively adequate medical facilities are available to people in the urban areas the rural areas are deprived of basic health care facilities. A dispassionate analysis will clearly reveal that this is clearly due to the fact that our medical personnel are not keen to go to the rural areas. Is it because the rural environment does not present lucrative opportunities to graduates in medicine or are the causes more deep rooted and related to the mode of training adopted for the profession which makes them unsuitable or misfits for practicing in areas remote from the requisite infrastructure and the so called benefits of modern civilization and its amenities? We can ill-afford to continue this state of affairs because this means depriving the multitudes of our population of the benefits of modern medicine and the advances which this country has made in these fields, especially in view of the heavy outlays being incurred on the training of medical personnel. What is your response to this challenge?

There can be no doubt that we must provide attractive conditions for doctors to work in rural areas. This is an obligation on the part of the Government, but there is also an equally important obligation on the part of the profession and especially on the part of bodies such as the National Academy of Medical Sciences. Part of the unwillingness of doctors to go out and work in rural areas is related to professional isolation through their being cut away from the main stream of medical knowledge and medical advance. Doctors want to keep themselves up-to-date and they want to practice the best possible medical care. Is not there a role for this Academy to do everything they can to ensure that the most scientific, the most up-to-date and most appropriate knowledge and techniques are transmitted to the doctors working in our health centres without delay? Can something be done? I realize that this is not the function only of the Academy. The professional societies and the Indian Medical Association have also a positive role to play. Your organization, the National Academy of Medical Sciences, can provide inspiration and foundation for this kind of work.

I wish to place before you a proposal even at the risk of it being dubbed a retrograde step. The proposal is to re-introduce a Diploma/Licentiate Course in Medical Sciences and make it a prerequisite for graduate studies in medicine. Young men and women desirous of taking up the medical profession should initially undergo the Diploma Course at medical institutes set up to cater to the rural surroundings. The scope of the diploma course in medicine should be such as to enable the Licentiates to diagnose most diseases and also to treat common diseases effectively. The diploma should enable them to practice only in areas where the population is 10000 or less. Those desirous of continuing graduate and post-graduate studies could be permitted after they have

practiced in rural areas for a minimum period of 2 to 3 years. Additionally the licentiates would have to sit for a competitive examination and practical test to assess their potential for advanced training.

The main advantages of the above scheme are that a fair percentage of the Licentiates may, if they pick up an adequate clientele, be content to practice as Licentiates in the areas in which they establish themselves. After graduation a certain percentage may be tempted to go back to their well-established clientele.

We should also ensure that medical graduates who desire to undertake post-graduate studies do so within the country. They may be permitted to go abroad only if such facilities are not available in the country or they are required to do so to meet national needs e.g. to update their knowledge in the latest fields of medicine in specified fields and to ensure interaction with current developments. The period of time they are permitted to spend abroad should be pre-determined. It should also be ensured that on completion of their studies abroad they would return back to India and work in the country for Government or designated hospitals, clinics etc. for a minimum period of 5 to 6 years.

If you have money and enough of it you could get the best medical treatment at the hands of some of the best medical practitioners. Those not so favourably placed have no other option but to depend on public hospitals. The over-crowding the lack of proper attention arising from the large numbers, the low standard of medical care, the absence of cleanliness, all these make one shudder at the very thought of going to a public hospital. I do not blame the members of the medical profession for this state of affairs. In fact they are putting up a valiant fight under heavy odds. You have to find ways and means to reduce this over-crowding and improve the state of cleanliness, hygiene and in turn the quality of medical care in our public hospitals.

The health of human beings is very much conditioned by the conditions under which they live. In underdeveloped and developing countries diseases caused by scarcity deserve first consideration. There is still enormous poverty and malnutrition in India despite all the progress we have made in many fields of life. Diseases like cholera, typhoid and jaundice are caused by poor personal hygiene and sanitation, unsafe drinking water supply and bad food habits. Retarded physical and mental development and night blindness are due to malnutrition, protein and vitamin deficiency. This is the tragedy of and a challenge to the Indian health and medical situation. A good many of the above mentioned diseases could be prevented by provision of adequate sanitary facilities and safe drinking water supply. Morbidity and mortality could be minimized by early detection of diseases, immunization and providing nutritious supplements.

Our country along with 145 other countries is a signatory to the Alma Ata Declaration of 1978, declaring our solemn resolve to secure health for all our people by the year 2000 through the Primary Health Care approach. We have reaffirmed this resolve of ours through acceptance of the Asian Charter for Health. The Academy consisting as it is of some of the finest medical scientists in the country should ask itself the question as to what role the Academy can play in the promotion of the Primary Health Care. Primary Health Care is in fact a developmental strategy. It aims at providing comprehensive health care including preventive and promotive care and some basic medical care to all people especially those that are in the greatest need, those that are most disadvantaged and underprivileged sections of society, those that are largely out of the reach of our health care services, those that are living in outlying areas. I am told that today we possess enough knowledge, enough technology, to be able to bring about substantial changes in the health and well-being of the people of our country through a determined application of all that we know. I am sure your Academy can play a meaningful role in helping to translate the knowledge and technology for the good of man.

Through primary health care a majority of diseases can be prevented or their effect minimized. Preventive medicine and health education constitute an important part of primary health care. Health education is essential for developing positive health attitudes with emphasis on staying

healthy as against the unfortunate, commonly accepted policy of providing medical care when a person falls ill. Health education by informing and educating the people on prevention of illness, developing a positive health attitude for maintain good health and early detection of disease thus assumes a high priority in any health care delivery system. Hospitalization is the most expensive part of any health care delivery system. Hospitalization costs, apart from direct hospital costs, should include indirect costs of loss of earning, provision of social and rehabilitation services and sickness benefits. This puts hospitalization beyond the reach of an average person. Primary health care can be delivered at a fraction of the costs of hospitalization. When all these factors are taken into consideration it is obvious that health education and primary health care are the most effective methods in terms of cost benefits of health care.

In the matter of preventive medicine and health education bodies such as the National Academy of Medical Sciences could play a meaningful role by publishing easily understandable literature in all the languages of simple home remedies for common diseases.

It is hardly necessary to stress the fact that in the modern world treatment of any kind of disease is getting quite costly and beyond the reach of large numbers of people. One of the major challenges in our country is to provide inexpensive drugs and medical aid to our people. The cost of drugs can be brought down only if their production is based on Indian research and on pharmaceutical processes evolved within the country. Patent agreements have been making even the ordinary drugs unduly costly. This is a problem, in the solving of which, you could make a signal contribution through your own research efforts and technical advice which you may render to the Government.

Then there are a number of major health issues with profound national implications that come up from time to time. We in this country have embarked upon a massive programme of development. But as we all know, unless we take extreme care, some of the so-called developmental activity may not be an unmixed blessing. The consequences of environmental degradation, the thoughtless exploitation of non-renewable resources, the profound ecological disturbances that are produced by many developmental activities, all these are having a major impact upon our daily lives and particularly upon the health of our people. These issues need to be raised, studied in depth and appropriate solutions found. No one in his senses can be against development, but an enlightened society would ensure that before any developmental activity is initiated, a thorough study is made of all the possible consequences of that activity and any undesirable effects that could follow should be dealt with initially. The problem of environmental sanitation in our rural areas has been crying for solution for decades together. Added to this we carry the additional burden of chemical pollution of our environment as a result of industrialization and other activities related to economic growth and productivity. What are the dimensions of these problems? How can they be tackled with our material and human resources? What are likely to be the problems in the near future that our country might face? Your Academy could select such problems for in depth studies and enlighten the Government and the public on various aspects of such problems.

I do hope that as a non-medical person I have not trespassed on your territory too far. No doubt you are not directly concerned with some of the problems mentioned by me. However, as enlightened men of the medical profession and as an organized body you could show the way and guide the people and the Government in solving some of the pressing health problems facing our countrymen.

I take this opportunity to congratulate all those who have been admitted to the fellowship and those who have received awards and prizes. I do hope the awards and fellowships would spur them on to greater efforts and dedication to the cause of alleviating human sufferings.

JAI HIND.