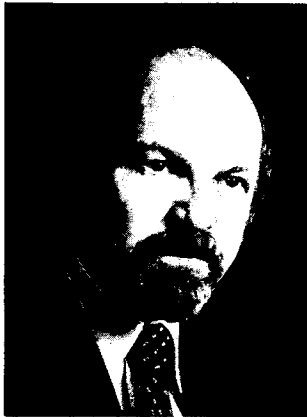


editorial



Integrity vs. Self Interest

by Reuven Bar-Levav, MD

Physicians are not exempt from having to examine their priorities carefully and courageously these days. With budget cutting on all governmental levels, scarce resources are becoming rare and we must painfully realize that not all that is desirable is possible. Scientifically trained minds of sophisticated professionals are nonetheless capable of being swayed from reason by strong feelings which masquerade as convictions. Since treating sick people is our daily task we naturally tend to feel strongly about budget cuts that affect the health of the populace. But others in all fields of endeavor and in all areas of work and creativity have similar involvements and convictions, and they, too, wish strongly to protect programs which are dear and close to their hearts.

Our society's very survival as a viable economic entity requires the taking of painful measures to cure the serious illnesses of inflation and underproduction. While all agree that some amputations are necessary, each group understandably wishes the amputations to occur elsewhere. Physicians are in the best position to understand that radical surgery is sometimes a necessity for the patient's survival, and we strongly recommend it in such cases, especially if patient or family find it difficult to accept the harsh reality.

The hour is finally at hand when slaughtering some sacred cows can no longer be postponed. Those grazing in our own backyard cannot reasonably be claimed to be holier than those of others. Well reasoned

arguments and editorials which claim special exemptions for Medicare and Medicaid, for hospitals or even for medical research and training must also yield to the realities of our limited resources. Healthy and productive individuals are our most important natural resource, and the health of the population should ideally never be sacrificed. But, since ideal conditions are not possible some would

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have to scramble and others will tragically get short-changed. We really cannot provide everything for everybody. The delusion that idealism can always prevail over realism is one part of the American dream from which we finally must wake up. It is a rude and painful awakening.

Responsible medical leadership has accepted this challenge. In testimony before Congressional Committees, the AMA was openly praised for taking a position which is unusual among interest groups: it supported budget cuts that affected our profession, in recognition of the higher priorities of the public good. Nobody wants things taken away from them that they have had before. It takes much courage, a clear perception of reality and a great deal of self-discipline to stick to the

necessary, if painful, course even in the face of disappointment and anger. Such understandable emotional reactions are usually short lived when clear thinking and serious reflection are interjected.

Integrity comes from the word "integer," which means whole. The dictionary confirms that a person of integrity is one whose value systems are characterized by wholeness, internal unity and unimpaired soundness. The integrity of our profession and our individual sense of integrity dictate that we not distort reality to fit our strong feelings, even if motivated by the highest principles. By taking firm positions in support of budget cuts that affect us directly, Medicine is a shining example to others who must undergo similar struggles. Increased respect for our profession will be one side benefit, even if accorded only grudgingly by those who usually deride us.

Leadership requires that leaders lead. Yet any leadership finds it easier to take courageous and sometimes unpopular stands if it knows that it does not isolate itself too much from those led. Readers are urged to actively indicate their support of these ideas to the leaders of their respective county, state, national medical societies.

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