

FELLOWSHIP IN THE AMERICAN COLLEGE OF SURGEONS

By ALBERT J. OCHSNER, M.D., F.A.C.S., CHICAGO

IT is important that we have a clear idea of what it means to be a Fellow of the American College of Surgeons. It means primarily that the surgeon who has attained this honorable position has been judged and found qualified in all important respects by those who know him most intimately.

The judgment is passed by a credentials committee selected by ballot by the Fellows of the College for each individual state and by a central committee acting for the two continents of North and South America, who weigh carefully all of the facts brought before them through inquiries directed to fellows whose work brings them in contact with the applicant.

QUALIFICATIONS

Honesty. The first and most important qualification is honesty. If the American College of Surgeons cannot conscientiously vouch for the honesty of a surgeon it has no right to include him in its Fellowship because it would not be just to the public. A dishonest surgeon, no matter how skillful, is a menace to the community.

Ability. The second qualification is ability. A man without ability should not be vouched for to the public which has no means of determining whether the surgeon possesses the ability to diagnose the disease or the necessary skill to perform the serious work which he may have to undertake. An honest man with less ability is far safer than a dishonest man with greater ability. But the College must demand both honesty and ability.

Education. There was a time when educational facilities were so meager in this country that many most excellent surgeons were produced through almost superhuman effort although greatly handicapped through lack of educational opportunities, but in every case these men made use of all the available opportunities. Consequently, the College of Surgeons has a right to demand that the present generation make use of the improved conditions which are now available. It is proper that, at least for all of the younger applicants, a very high degree of educational qualification be demanded.

Experience. The older surgeons can remember when only few opportunities for gaining experience were available before entering individual practice. The hospital positions for young men

were few; there were no fellowships and very few assistantships, consequently the young surgeon was compelled to accumulate his experience in his personal practice.

At the present time many such positions are available and consequently it is right that the young surgeon shall accumulate a large experience in the service as an assistant of an older experienced surgeon before taking the responsibility of independent surgical work of a serious character in which his inexperience might endanger the life or health of the patient. It is, therefore, right that the College should require experience as one of the qualifications for Fellowship.

Human interest. No surgeon can become a useful member of society unless he shows human interest in those who entrust themselves to his care.

A selfish surgeon lacking human interest is a menace to a community and does not deserve the prestige given him by Fellowship in the College.

Industry. Unless a surgeon is industrious he will soon become inefficient, because he does not keep up with the advances of the surgical profession. Such a member of the profession has no right to enjoy the benefits of Fellowship. His example is especially harmful for the development of the younger generation of surgeons.

Ethics. In order to build up the surgical profession of a community, it is important that the ethical relations toward other surgeons and to the public be correct.

There is a close relationship between the first and last requirements. A surgeon who is absolutely honest can not well be unethical and vice versa; but there are certain relations, in which custom plays an important part, which introduces a difference.

Ethical conduct implies honesty, fair play, and consideration for the other person's interests. It represents the practical application of the Golden Rule both to colleague and client which is often not an easy matter especially in a profession in which the element of competition is so important a part as in the practice of surgery.

There was a time when many of the most honorable members of the surgical profession felt that in order to deal fairly with the practitioner who referred patients to them, a portion of the fee should be paid to the practitioner. The result of this, however, proved most pernicious, because it developed a form of barter in human life. In

many instances the practitioner referred the patient not to the most competent surgeon but to the one who was willing to pay the highest percentage of the fee collected, without regard for his learning, experience, skill, and judgment. This really meant nothing more nor less than barter in human life.

The American College of Surgeons demands of applicants for Fellowship that they be not guilty of this practice and will not be in the future. It makes the practice of splitting of fees in any form an absolute reason for preventing the admission to the American College of Surgeons on the one hand, and a cause for expulsion from the College on the other.

In the large as well as in small communities it is true to human nature that professional jealousies should exist, but the college has a right to expect its Fellows to put aside all personal differences and to support for Fellowship every colleague who possesses the required qualifications without regard to personal likes or dislikes. It would be quite as reprehensible to recommend for Fellowship a friend lacking the proper qualifications as it would be to oppose a candidate possessing these qualifications because of a personal dislike.

It is the duty of every Fellow to encourage young surgeons in the acquisition of the necessary qualifications, because it is exceedingly important to this country to give proper development to the next generation of surgeons.

Selfishness has no place in the acceptance or rejection of candidates for Fellowship.

HISTORIES

The College demands from each applicant that he submit a sufficient number of histories of important cases treated to convince the examining committee; that the applicant make it his practice to give each patient that comes under his treatment a careful physical examination; that he give proper consideration to the clinical history; that he make the necessary laboratory examinations; that he invite consultation when

necessary; that he plan the necessary treatment or operations carefully and avoid unnecessary operations; that he show proper surgical judgment and skill in performing the operation; that he record postoperative conditions and end-results.

It seems that there can be no method more favorable than this to determine a basis upon which the College can base its judgment for vouching to the public that the surgeon has proper scientific and technical qualifications.

It must be remembered that carelessness on the part of the College in admitting surgeons to Fellowship might cause great harm to the public, because the public has learned to trust their lives in the hands of the Fellows of the College. That a surgeon is not a Fellow of the College does not necessarily mean that he is incompetent or dishonest. There are nearly two thousand surgeons who have applied for Fellowship whose credentials have not convinced the committees that they are competent for admission to Fellowship. No doubt in many of these cases the defects in the records will be cleared up and they will later be admitted, but before they can be admitted your committees must be convinced that all of the requirements have been fulfilled. There are many young surgeons with splendid training who are looking forward to Fellowship as soon as they have acquired the necessary experience. The fact that these are not Fellows at the present time is no discredit to them so long as they are striving in an honorable way to acquire the necessary qualifications.

It is the duty of the Fellows to inspire these young men with the ideals of the College so that they may in due time strengthen the organization.

To the public the American College of Surgeons must mean that its Fellows can be trusted because of their honesty, their learning, their experience, their skill, their human interest, and their ethical appreciation of the Golden Rule.

Fellowship in the American College of Surgeons must mean that every surgeon who has this distinction deserves the absolute confidence of the community in which he lives.