



The perils of the single criterion of success

In the first half of the century that has just ended and before, fame and recognition could be gained in a number of ways – in addition to having been born as an aristocrat or member of a royal family – by becoming a scholar, a priest, an officer in the Army or the Navy, an artist, a sportsman, or a very rich person. Scholars and priests, as well as top class sportsmen and officers, were highly respected: the reward of recognition was sufficient to motivate individuals to spend endless hours, the better part of their life in order to achieve such fame. The recognition was not linked to monetary gain: scholars, teachers, philosophers, and priests were often poor throughout their lives, but neither they nor others saw this as a disincentive to continuing their line of activity. Becoming rich did not necessarily carry much prestige: the rich were often envied and despised, rarely respected. Being an artist was seen as a calling, sometimes as being blessed by a gift from God – neither requiring nor resulting from determination, exercise, or learning.

The existence of multiple ways of being recognized was a blessing for the society. Its members could choose any one of the many ways of self-assertion. Many succeeded in their efforts and felt that they had done well in life although they never had much money. It was also possible to motivate and attract people to participate in activities that were unpaid but could contribute to a feeling of self-esteem, of being useful and being asserted in one of the many respectable walks of life.

And then, possibly in the second half of the 20th century, financial success gained in prestige. Other successes and achievements began to be measured and compared in terms of money as well. To be respectable the scholar had to be able to get money for his or her knowledge: just knowing things ceased to be a claim to fame. The win-

ner of the 64,000 US\$ contest was admired because he could gain a large sum of money for his or her knowledge of a particular field; others who might have just as much knowledge in another field had to prove it by gaining that much money with their knowledge. Some of the previously highly respected professions stopped being prestigious. Becoming known as a brave officer or a fine teacher, a priest or philosopher was not all that attractive any longer: it neither resulted in money nor it allowed access to things that the wealthy could enjoy. The attraction of becoming a top class sportsman was to a large extent fueled by the fact that such positions were the door to major financial rewards. Success in the arts did not escape the criterion of monetary gain: artists had to sell their works or be handsomely rewarded by money for their performance in order to be highly respected and recognized as valuable. Artists who remained poor because they could not sell their work were no longer seen as admirable bohemians: they were more often classed as failures.

The consequences of this process of reduction of the numbers of ways to recognition and assertion of one's value are bad for individuals and for society. Only a few people will become sufficiently rich to be satisfied with their success. Many of the other ways to gain fame and recognition – being unlikely to be associated with monetary gain – have become unattractive. The number of people who feel satisfied with their achievement in life is therefore falling and so is the number of people who try hard to be successful in the previously highly esteemed professions. In most countries of the world, it is becoming difficult to find candidates for the institutions that train teachers, priests, and officers. Young people no longer meet artisans or people in public service who are proud of their skill and conscientious performance: these qualities ceased to be respected because they are

not likely to result in immediate or slightly delayed material gain. A person who will invest much of his or her time to gain excellence in a pursuit that is not likely to bring money is considered foolish. The central preoccupation of an ever increasing majority is the structuring and use of leisure time and holidays, all work being seen as a necessary ill and not as a valuable part of human existence. Working to help others without being paid for it has also lost much of its attractiveness and the many important tasks in societies remain undone because they are not bringing any financial or other material benefit.

Gradually governments find it more and more expensive to run a society, because the things that were previously done for free are now to be paid.

In the field of health, the thirst for money has had significant consequences. Most of the developed countries have to import unqualified or mid-level qualified staff from other countries: for the inhabitants of richer countries, the salaries for these jobs are too low and the feeling of satisfaction over one's excellent performance as a nurse – despite a relatively low income – has vanished. Corruption of high-level health workers has become rampant in many countries in which the income of doctors is low. The heroic doctors who ventured into the far-out provinces and worked under difficult conditions for little else but the immense satisfaction that they were useful to their patients are a phenomenon best found in books written fifty or hundred years ago. Medical disciplines that bring higher income are overcrowded while others have difficulties in enticing candidates to enter postgraduate training or accept

posts. Research has become more expensive because those who do it now require payment for the extra hours spent in the laboratory or in the library: previously most of those who did research did it without financial compensation and were satisfied by the mention of their name on the by-line of the publication. In many countries, it is difficult to find professionals who will enter academic careers. Being the head of the department has become unattractive unless accompanied by financial benefits accruing from, for example, the charging fees for treating private patients placed on beds "belonging" to the Head of the Department. And, as with society in general, running the health system is becoming more and more expensive because so many of the chores that were previously done for patients as part of the citizens' moral duty now have to be paid – usually in hard cash to professionals of the health and social system.

Perhaps these developments were unavoidable and were the price to pay for the economic development of the countries and societies in the industrialized world. Today, they have spread to the rest of the world where the consequences of this new singularity of purpose – to gain money – are even more nefarious, for obvious reasons.

Thinking about problems that worry us is useful – but as with a sick patient it is our duty to think about treatment of the ill, which has beset societies and so much of medical practice, teaching, and research. A journey of a thousand miles, say the Chinese, begins with a single step: perhaps we should begin the journey to the cure of the ailing societies by remaining aware that all is not well and that it is our duty to invent solutions.