

MEDICINE AND POLITICS: The Meeting Point

By

Senator Dr. Olorunnimbe Mamora

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Introduction

I am highly privileged, gratified and humbled to be invited to deliver the first of the **Late Professor T. Adesanya Ige Grillo** Distinguished Alumni Lecture Series. I cannot explain how and why the lot fell on me to carry this burden albeit a welcome one. It is probably providential.

I thank the organizers for considering me worthy of this honour. *The Late Professor Grillo* impacted so much on many of us here gathered today and we are grateful to him even as he enjoys celestial bliss. His legacies remain evergreen. I have always considered myself an ambassador of the medical profession in the wonderland of politics. My politics and politicking had conception right here in this great citadel of learning and culture, G-R-E-A- T IFE! (*Now known as OAU, Oba Awon University*).

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is a thing of joy and great pleasure indeed to be back to my alma mater to give this lecture on Medicine and Politics. This pleasure derives from the fact that this lecture provides me a unique opportunity to stimulate the interest of professionals, and most especially Medical Doctors, in politics. Oftentimes, medical and dental practitioners shy away from participating in Parisian politics and relegate themselves to just "Innocent bystanders", grumblers or at best, passing side commentaries over a bottle of beer and pepper soup, rather than take the centre stage.

The situation must change because nature abhors vacuum and if highly intelligent professionals like medical doctors would not come to govern, those who can barely write their names will not only dictate the tune, they will call the shots with messianic ignorance. This was what obtained largely in our polity and contributed immensely to our present "political tsunamis". Socrates, that great philosopher of old once said "The greatest punishment for the wise who refuse to rule is to suffer the rule of idiots".

Thank God, the situation is gradually changing for the better. We now have the likes of the Senate Leader, Senator Dr. Dalhatu Tafida a former personal physician to President

Shehu Shagari, Senator Professor Lubril Aminu, a first class professor of Medicine, Senator Martins Yellowe, a notable psychiatrist in the present senate of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. There are some other medical doctors like Dr. Wale Okediran, also a medical graduate of this University and a very brilliant writer and author, Dr. Aminu Safana and others in the Federal House of Representatives. Governor Peter Odili is a medical practitioner of repute. The political guru and acclaimed Godfather of Kwara politics, Dr. Olusola Saraki is a medical doctor. All these distinguished personalities are professionals in politics as opposed to professional politicians. When you consider the contributions of these eminent medical doctors in politics, you will agree with me if I borrow the 7Up advert "the difference is clear".

For me, I stand before this distinguished audience and say medicine is my wedded wife and politics my mistress. I plead not guilty! At first glance, medicine and politics would appear to be two distant callings to warrant any serious discourse on the possibility of their ever having a meeting point. Indeed, there might be the temptation to see the two along parallel lines, out to accomplish different and unrelated missions. This sort of simplistic assumption is capable of giving credence to the belief that a practitioner of medicine should have little or no business becoming a practitioner of politics. This was the view generally held even in our days as medical students. Those of us who dared to participate in students' union Politics were dubbed unserious students. Some were even called "NF A" (*No Future Association.*)

However, upon deeper reflection, and more significantly in view of one's personal strong political tendencies and involvement, notwithstanding the call of medicine as a professional career, the task at hand becomes more challenging, engaging, and above all, finds relevance in our present national dispensation. As a matter of what ought to be the ideal, medicine and politics could as well be taken as Siamese twins sharing similar umbilical cord.

In this regard therefore, rather than merely focusing on the meeting point of medicine and politics, we should be talking more about how the principles and ethics of one are shared by the other and their collaborative impact for maximum benefit of the society at large.

Historical Perspectives

You might have heard the story of **Rudolf Virchow**, the German Pathologist, who just at the age of 26 in 1847 had already become one of Germany's greatest scientists. Virchow was asked to investigate an epidemic of typhus, which had broken out in upper Silesia (currently located in Poland). Virchow concluded that the cause of the epidemic was "mismanagement of the region by the Berlin government". Virchow's recommendations included full democracy for Silesia, allowing Polish as the official language of the

region, separation of church and state, shifting the burden of taxation from poor to the rich, a program for road construction, the improvement of agriculture, and the establishment of farming cooperatives.

As expected, the Berlin Council was annoyed by Virchow's report. The council criticized Virchow for producing a political report rather than the scientific report. It was then that Rudolf Virchow made his famous statement, which still subsists till today: "Medicine is a social science and politics is nothing but medicine writ large!" i.e. "Medicine is a social science and politics nothing but medicine on a grand scale". He stated categorically that if medicine were to be successful, then it must enter political and social life because diseases were caused by defects in society. He stressed that "If disease is an expression of individual life under unfavourable circumstances, then epidemics must be indicative of mass disturbance".

While health is understood to include physical, mental and social well-being, it is concluded that the violation or neglect of any human right will impact adversely on health challenging, engaging, and above all, finds relevance in our present national dispensation.

Medicine and Politics

I hold the view that the relationship that exists between medicine and politics transcends a struggle at raking up some meeting points, since in substance and reality; both are addressing the survival of man and humanity, albeit from different angles. In other words, it is like trying to use two approaches to achieve one goal. This is however not to discountenance the differences where they patently exist.

While not going into strict definitions, I should begin by attempting to have a general overview of our concepts. For the purpose of this exercise, I shall merely be contented with relevant broad concepts to aid better understanding of our approach. In simple parlance, the central essence of medicine is the physical, mental and social well-being of the patient. By the same stretch, the main purpose of politics is the socio-economic good and advancement of man and society. Medicine is concerned more about life and healthy living, - in capsule, about humanity. It is meant to provide a soothing relief to the afflicted, give vitality to the weak and vibrancy to the physically knocked-down. It also forges a relationship of confidence between the practitioner (the Physician) and the patient. On the other hand, politics is a forum for social contract between the politician and the people. Electoral votes are expected to be exchanged for performance by politicians such that would translate to socio-economic upliftment of the society at large.

The Physician Oath

The concern for humanity led the General Assembly of the World Medical Association at Geneva, Switzerland in September 1948 to evolve the Physicians Oath Declaration. This oath administered to all medical practitioners on qualification, amended by the 22nd World Medical Assembly at Sydney, Australia in August 1968 states, among others:

- the solemn pledge of physician to consecrate his/her life to the service of humanity
- the resolve to practise the profession of medicine with conscience and dignity, such ~ that the health of the patient will be of first consideration, ~ that the secrets which are confided in the practitioner will be respected even after the patient has died,
- that the honour and the noble traditions of the profession will be maintained by all means, ~ that colleagues will relate as brothers,
- that considerations of religion, nationality, race, party politics or social standing will not be permitted to intervene between the physician and the patient,
- that the utmost respect for human life from the time of conception will be maintained, and
- that the knowledge of medicine acquired will not be used contrary to the laws of humanity.

Distinguished ladies and gentleman, the above declaration, also known in medical circles as the Hippocratic Oath, expected to be freely made, is meant to be binding on all practitioners of medicine. Upon a critical look at this oath, I cannot find much difficulty adopting its core essence to the practice of politics in relation to the society. Since politics essentially is concerned with gaining and using power for the advancement of society, each of the enumerated vows by new entrants to the practice of medicine could very well be substituted for use by operators of politics, except of course the fact that politics still remains an all-comer's affair.

In other words, politics, just like medicine, is supposed to be honourable simply because it is aimed at, and concerned with humanity. I am however not unaware of the deep-seated cynicism that tends to sidetrack integrity in politics, mainly because of the way it is sometimes practised in this clime. For instance, unlike medicine, politics here is hardly associated with nobility of purpose and public spiritedness. Politicians, unlike medical practitioners are not perceived as self-respecting people engaged in respectable and responsive vocation, but more as ambitious, greedy and desperate seekers of power and personal wealth. But we must agree that these negative perceptions are largely self-

inflicted by successive political actors.

The demonisation of politics is a cumulative result of what ought to be done but have been left undone and the sometimes unprincipled craving for power by politicians who jettison morality, dignity, honour, decorum and good conscience. Some of our political actors exhibit behaviours such as cross carpeting, political prostitution, "come and eat syndrome", "No permanent friend but permanent interests approach", opportunism, shamelessness, arrogance of power, and unbridled display of ill gotten wealth.

Yet, I refuse to accept that prejudices and sentiments about the misdeeds of some practitioners should be allowed to becloud or override a better sense of what is a proper and edifying vocation in the service of society. The faults are definitely not with politics, but more with the manner some politicians choose to play it. For instance, I have never agreed with the notion that there is no morality in politics. The fact that we have sometimes experienced what is less than the ideal in our politics here is not to make it the universal norm. Political aberrations in Nigeria, or anywhere else, should never derail us into elevating an exception above the rule.

Therefore, in applying the principles guiding the practice of medicine to politics, rather than see a parallel, I am choosing to see more of the complements. But in doing this, we cannot afford to overlook the lacuna as well. Like the physician, a politician is expected to consecrate his/her life to the service of humanity, more so as he/she exists in politics, because the people, not minding religion, tribe, sex or social status in the society, constitute the constituency to which the politician is expected to be answerable.

A politician as a public officer is also bound to respect the provisions of the constitution, which he has sworn to defend. Same for the various oaths he has sworn to. These we shall come to later. In the same vein as the medical practitioner, a politician with the resolve to play the game with conscience and dignity will turn out to be one with integrity, capable of conferring honour on his/her calling.

Mind of God and Politics

The moment politics imbibes the spirit of utmost respect for human life, with a determination of politician not to use an acquired political position contrary to the laws of the land; without doubt, politics will play the role ordained to it by God and man.

The Almighty God who is the architect of humanity created man as a political animal - with instincts and desires. According to the Christian belief, God in His infinite wisdom, spent the first five days of creation decreeing into existence what would make living for man tolerable and meaningful. After seeing that all that He had created - including sunshine, moonlight, water, vegetation, animal and fishes - were good, it was then God

decided to create man in His own likeness. And in doing this God gave man dominion over all other things created.

The Holy Bible records in Genesis 1.28:

"And God blessed them and God said unto them, be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth and subdue: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. "

This is to show God's deep concern for the welfare of humanity. Hence, since He placed medicine at the disposal of man for the enhancement of good health and healthy living, so also is politics institutionalized for the socio-economic well-being and advancement of man. If I may be permitted to look into the Scripture once again, John, the Apostle of love, amplified the mind of God when he expressed his greatest desire for man in III John 2 thus:

"Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health (Emphasis mine) and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well. "

With due regard to hermeneutists, the priority of God is that it should be well with man spiritually (soul), physically health wise and materially (prosperity).

Therefore, those in political position to exercise power at the behest of others are bound by the ordinance of God to always operate within the will of God concerning humanity.

Constitutional Imperatives

Perhaps also the need to obey God was what motivated the framers of the Nigerian Constitution, which set out the way the Nigerian society should be governed.

The people who govern the society invariably are the politicians. This is not to say the constitution is meant for politicians only. The constitution is supreme and its provisions have binding effect on the entire society.

Under the Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy in Chapter 2 of the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria, Section 17, Subsection 2C on Social Objectives unequivocally states that all "governmental actions shall be humane."

Specifically, Section 17 2(d) stipulates that "exploitation of human or natural resources in any form whatsoever for reasons other than the good of the community, shall be prevented."

Further in Section 17 3(c) of the same Chapter, the law of the land commands that "the state shall direct its policy towards ensuring that all citizens, without discrimination on any group, whatsoever, have the opportunity for securing adequate means of livelihood as well as adequate opportunity to secure suitable employment", and in that "the health, safety and welfare of all persons in employment are safeguarded and not endangered or

abused", and also in that" there are adequate medical and health facilities for all persons"

(b) Also in Section 17 3(g), the Constitution demands that provisions be "made for public assistance in deserving cases of other conditions of need." And in 3(h), that" evolution and promotion of family life is encouraged".

Chapter IV of the 1999 Constitution of Nigeria, which deals with fundamental rights, supports the goal of medicine, which is preservation of life and reduction of human suffering. Section 33 (1) states" Every person has a right to life and no one shall be deprived intentionally of his life. . ." Section 34 (1) states "Every individual is entitled to respect for the dignity of his person, and accordingly ,No person shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment.

From the fore goings, it is clear from all interpretations, that those who gave us the Constitution embraced the tender and compassionate mind of God, and consequently permitted the milk of human kindness to flow through their veins - just the same way as a committed physician would have compassion on his/her patient. From all indications, the expectation is that whoever is coming into politics to implement the constitution must share the same social values with the framers, and therefore be ever-willing to make living more worthwhile, not only for the individuals, but for families across the land as well.

Furthermore, Part I of the 5th Schedule of the 1999 constitution of Nigeria prescribes Code of Conduct for Public Officers (who directly or indirectly are politicians). Section I is instructive. It says" A public officer shall not put himself in a position where his personal interest conflicts with his duties and responsibilities".

Compare this with the physician oath" that considerations of religion, nationality, race, party politics or social standing will not be permitted to intervene between the physician and the patient". The similarity I believe is striking. It is not and cannot be accidental.

The Seventh Schedule of the 1999 constitution of Nigeria contains the oath of allegiance and oath of office for politicians assuming various positions in public office. For example the oath of office of President states:

I,do solemnly swear/affirm that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to the Federal Republic of Nigeria; that as President of Federal Republic of Nigeria, I will discharge my duties to the best of my ability, faithfully and in accordance with the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the law, and always in the interest of the sovereignty, integrity, solidarity, well-being (emphasis mine) and prosperity of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, that I will strive to preserve the Fundamental Objectives and Directive Principles of State Policy contained in the Constitution of the Federal Republic

of Nigeria; that I will not allow my personal interest to influence my official conduct or my official decisions; that I will to the best of my ability preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria; that I will abide by the Code of Conduct contained in the Fifth Schedule to the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria; that in all circumstances, I will do right to all manner of people, according to law, without fear or favour, affection or ill-will that I will not directly or indirectly communicate or reveal to any person any matter which shall be brought under my consideration or shall become known to me as President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, except as may be required for the due discharge of my duties as President; and that I will devote myself to the service and well-being (emphasis mine) of the people of Nigeria. . *So help me God.*

This oath is not much different from that of a Governor, or a Senator, or any other legislator or even that of a Council Chairman. It stresses the well being of the people of Nigeria in all its ramifications. The aspect of confidentiality (or secrecy) in this oath is similar to that which obtains in the Hippocratic Oath for physicians.

As earlier stated, in an ideal setting, the main purpose of medicine that is shared by politics is in its compassion about life and humanity; and also that the several other shared values make for the compatibility of medicine and politics rather than creating disparity between the two callings.

I have also expressed the view that the aberration being experienced in our own society here should not substitute for the reality of politics. That is, the fact that our people are not yet enjoying the expected dividends derivable from the virtues of politics just the same way that medicine has been delivering thus far, can never be enough to deny the delivery potentials of politics.

Politics and Human Development

It might be useful at this juncture to examine, if only briefly, some of the obstacles that have been militating against the proper actualization of politics, disabling it from delivering on its promises. An undeniable truth is that our long years under military dictatorship - with its own unorthodox brand of politics, tragically stunted political growth and constitutional democracy. With the turn of political events around the world, it has become evident that democracy and human development move in tandem.

Wherever there is the opening up of the political space, such that popular participation is encouraged, an enabling environment for economic development and the alleviation of

poverty is provided. From our own experience here, we have seen that residual poverty has been a basic bane of the nation's political development. This is because as the populace has become largely impoverished, living has been more on roller coaster. Benjamin Franklin, the American Statesman, Scientist and writer once declared that "Poverty often deprives a man of all spirit and virtue; it is hard for an empty bag to stand upright." The book of Proverbs in the Holy Bible supports this position. It says: "He whose appetite is satisfied disdains honey, but he that is hungry, everything bitter is sweet."

Due to long years of denial, politics in Nigeria of today is being seen more as a burden on the people - rather than the relief that it is supposed to provide; hence, the deafening refrain in the demand for the dividends of democracy across party and *geo-political* lines. Since the masses of the people could not see much of the promised democratic gains manifesting on their lives in almost six years of return to party politics, they tend to feel shot-changed, when, on the other hand they see the opulent transformation of their contemporaries of yesteryears now in politics.

Ladies and Gentlemen, why these shortcomings are not necessarily that of politics per se, it is not pleasant to note that in our society, as much as in most parts of Africa, political independence has not brought what it promised. More often, political practitioners are pre-occupied with power and its material gains and benefits than the political ideologies of how the society should be organized and governed to the best advantage of the larger number of the citizenry. This of course is at variance with medical practice, which emphasizes life and the health of patients above pecuniary considerations.

We must admit that a number of politicians come out to buy their electorates votes - and consequently their conscience. Hence, since the umbilical cord that is supposed to link the politician and the people has been mOligaged, the milk of compassion ceases to flow as soon as power is attained. This perhaps is why many of our political leaders - in all tiers of government, mount the saddle of power and authority often without demonstrable commitment to the responsibilities of their offices. Many among office holders who came into office with apparently good intentions, programmes and potentials, more often, ultimately end changing nothing and thereby failing to impact positively on the lives of those who gave them their mandates. While a number of such political leaders suffer from overdose of power aphrodisiac, others are victims of professional sycophancy.

The Challenge of Politics

Under our current political dispensation, and with a dominant Peoples Democratic Party

stranglehold on the polity, we have seen in the main, the transformation from military to civilian dictatorship. The situation has been further compounded by weak, disorganized and badly fractured opposition parties.

Civilian dictatorship is exemplified by old attitudes, culture and dispositions of those at the driving seat being carried over to the new dispensation. This trend might have led to the fear being widely expressed that the nation has merely replaced a dictatorship with another dictatorship, albeit with a changed regalia. There are many examples of abuse of office, disregard for court rulings, human right violations, constitutional violation and failure to uphold the rule of law.

However, for the avoidance of doubt, let me state loud and clear that notwithstanding this non-salutary political tendency, the society is still much better off than it was under the combined best military dictatorship that did no more than further bringing the nation to its knees on all fronts. At least, we have the opportunity of saying our minds even when political leaders appear deaf and impervious to reason. There is also a chance of change through voting out whosoever, and whichever political party found not measuring up to standard in another few years. The proviso here however is if Independent National Electoral Commission becomes truly independent credible, responsive and responsible.

Nevertheless, we must admit that politics, as much as medicine, is about effectively shouldering responsibilities. The real challenge of politics before us today as a nation is not to seek a space away from the rest of the world, but to begin to formulate and implement political principles from within the nation, which stress and harness the potentials and dignity of the Nigerian people.

It is also to respond positively to the electorate through provision of the greatest good to the greatest number of people. It is by so doing, that we can seek legitimacy in the comity of civilized democratic world.

After all, even in this era of trumpeted globalization, we still live in an interdependent world. Hence, a nation without the capacity and political will to respond to the yawning needs of its people has no moral justification whatsoever to cling on to an inclusive notion of sovereignty.

The continental leadership role that has been entrusted on Nigeria because of her huge human and natural resources is still begging for full utilization and actualization. The level the nation decides to elevate its politics to, is bound to determine the extent to which it can use its position to influence and Transform the destiny of the African continent and the Blackman in Diaspora.

Since a physician would vow that "even under threat," he would not use his "medical

knowledge contrary to the laws of humanity," practitioner of politics owes it a duty not to use his/her acquired or entrusted political mandate to the detriment of the people in particular, and the society at large.

Society, just like medicine is not static, it is dynamic. As new advances are being made daily in the field of medicine, so also are the dynamics of politics - leading to political evolution of society, manifesting in better understanding, new alliances, appreciation and commitment to fresh approaches at resolving emerging challenges and problems. The challenges we face as a nation at the moment include political, social and economic restructuring. This is the basis for the clamour for Sovereign National Conference or an all inclusive National Dialogue. Allied matters confronting us include fiscal federalism, marginalisation, resource control, devolution of power, and credible electoral system.

Conclusion

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, in conclusion, politics is bound to serve its rightful purpose if and when it internalizes those ideals and virtues that have made medicine a noble, honourable, responsible and respected *calling*. If a physician could pledge to make his colleagues his brothers, then a politician is expected to be his brother's keeper and see his own colleague as a co-servant of the people. In other words, if physicians see their colleagues as laborers in the vineyard of health, politicians should strive to work together for the commonwealth of the people who have elected them.

Whenever those in politics imbibe the spirit of medicine, policies and their implementation are bound to become humane. Of course, this can better be accomplished through political liberation of the mind, responsiveness to peoples' aspirations, respect for the electorate and their rights, cultivation of personal integrity, self-respect, the enthronement of social justice and morality in politics. If politicians would imbibe these attributes, then we would have secured one guarantee and that guarantee is sustainable societal development and survival of humanity.

In all this, I speak to myself as well.

I thank you for listening.