

Editorial...

MIDDLE EAST JOURNAL OF ANESTHESIOLOGY
HAND, HEAD AND HEART

Keep thy heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life.....Proverbs 4:23

These words come from the ancient king Solomon, famous for his wisdom..... and also for his many wives. Here he is urging us to “keep” something; to safeguard it, to value it, because it lies at the foundation of human well-being. It is not our medications or our laryngoscopes that Solomon wants us to protect. These are but tools in our hands to help us manage our medical tasks efficiently. Nor is Solomon urging that we “keep” the mental faculties, the knowledge we prize so highly. The big issues of life, he says, are settled elsewhere..... in the human heart. It is out of the heart that flow our character, our ethical values, our sense of duty and honor, our integrity, and our compassion for others.

Can we keep the “heart” in anesthesiology? Can we reinforce and build the human side of our profession, while at the same time giving proper attention to its science? Forty years ago the first issue of this Journal appeared, and a lot of heart went into that effort. Today, few readers will stop to wonder how the Journal began, and what triggered this new enterprise. Where did the idea, the vision, come from, and who were those pioneers?

Well, I was there, a participant in the mini-drama. Now in my later years, I must retell the story as I experienced it.

The Middle East Journal of Anesthesiology originated in a gathering of professional leaders who assembled in Beirut in 1965. They included university professors and anesthesia thought-leaders from the principal territories in the region. And they came together with encouragement and financial assistance from the Astra Pharmaceutical Company. The

visionary people who were representing Astra at that time asked me to host that meeting. Its purpose was clear. In our region anesthesiology was lagging behind other fields of medicine. It needed a boost, and the assembled leaders were challenged to come up with strategies that would energize our young specialty.

That meeting in Beirut was a turning point. For most of us, who had lived in professional isolation from even our close neighbours, a new day was dawning, as we met and celebrated with stout-hearted colleagues. The issue, their inadequate equipment and drugs, their search for academic recognition, their financial shortfalls..... all sounded so similar. But these problems seemed to diminish as obstacles when we shared them, as we told our personal stories. Wariness vanished, barriers fell, and strangers became trusting friends.

Sitting quietly in the background during our discussions were those two persons from Astra who quickly became, for all of us, more than business-people. They were Dr. Halina Proscher, surgeon from Hamburg, and Mr. Mogens Green-Petersen from Sodertalje in Sweden. They became true friends. Their interest went beyond their company's normal business affairs. They really cared for us and the obstacles we faced. And because I spent many hours with them, debating plans and strategies, I can assure you, after these many years, that we should honour them as genuine benefactors of anesthesiology at that special time in our regional history. They saw an opportunity to provide critical help in starting a new fire, and they persuaded their company bosses in Sodertalje that Astra could make a vital difference in a key region of the world. Here was an example of far-sighted corporate altruism at its finest. To them and to Astra I will always be grateful.

Amongst the strategies the assembled leaders agreed upon, free and open communication was foremost, and a journal was seen to be a necessary tool. This would take a lot of work, and no one among us had expertise in publishing. But someone had to get the ball rolling, and the job fell into my hands. We learned as we went along. We had to start assembling good scientific papers, edit them into acceptable shape, negotiate with a reliable printer, and design a page layout and an

attractive cover. There were subtle details that called for creative thinking. One was to find a logo, and I chose a stylized opium poppy that was dreamed up by some unknown graphics artist at l'Imprimerie Catholique. Then there was the Shakespearean motto, straight out of Hamlet, that I found by searching through the Oxford Dictionary of Famous Quotations: "For some must watch while some must sleep". It was magically appropriate, and on the front cover of M.E.J.A. it will be ours forever. Finally, we had to prepare a realistic budget, chase medical suppliers for advertising copy, and construct a regional mailing list. Here again, Astra provided some essential seed money and placed with us a back-cover advertisement that adorned the Journal for many years.

After months of sweat and tears, the Journal's birthing took place when the first issue appeared in June 1966. While I was the lucky (and relieved) man who served as *accoucheur*, I mention that humbly and with gratitude to others who helped get this thing started. From memory I can recall some of the colleagues who gathered at that first meeting. They included Mahmoud el-Hakim from Kasr el-Aini and Wadid Bakhom from Ain Shams in Cairo, Bourhan Abed from Damascus, Taha Jasser and M. Kayyali from Aleppo, al-Uzri from Baghdad, Ali Farr from Teheran, and Sadi Sun from Istanbul. Others soon joined the optimistic chorus at the first international conference which convened at about the same time. And I recall with pleasure the names of visiting colleagues Oner, Demir, Fotoohi, Shaker, El Shirbini, Nassar, Khalil, Enaizi, Tashayod, Badii and Baraka. Added to them were my Lebanese colleagues Muallem, Kanaan, Asmar, Sabbagh and Haddad. All of them, plus others whose names I do not immediately recall, were enthusiastic supporters of our new climate of good-neighborliness.

After this hopeful beginning we faced the task of keeping the newborn baby strong and growing, of improving the Journal and expanding its usefulness. For the long term it was desirable that this job be passed from me to others. After only three years I moved from Beirut to Loma Linda University in California. And I must emphasize here our good fortune in being succeeded as torchbearer by the knowledgeable, passionate, unstoppable human being we know as Anis Baraka. In

addition to his heavy responsibilities of directing a busy department at the American University of Beirut, and producing an unceasing stream of original scientific papers, Anis assumed the role of M.E.J.A. Editor-in-Chief.

Through some difficult years in Lebanon Anis hung onto that editorial task undaunted, and brought our Journal to the place of respect it enjoys today. In this task, for many years, he has been assisted by Fouad Salim Haddad, a close friend and wise counselor who is skilled in Arabic literature and is widely read in the culture, history and medical writing of our region. His editing skills and judgment have left an imprint on the Journal that is beyond measuring. It continues to this day, and we are all in his debt. Together, Anis and Fouad made a remarkable team that displayed a rare combination of hand, head..... and heart.

I have written these words in a look-back mode, to record for all time the heartfelt devotedness that I saw in your pioneer leaders forty years ago. They were good, great men. But I must leave you now with a message for the future.

Where does your destiny lie? What visionary plans are you laying today, in your own hospital, in your teaching role, that will serve as a strong foundation to shape the medicine of tomorrow and the lives of those who come after you? What will the M.E.J.A. look like forty years from now? And in that future day, will our successors look back and thank us for the choices we make and the example we provide now?

Anesthesia practice in the future will be more sophisticated and technically more complex. We will have new and improved drugs and monitors that do their job more efficiently. But I expect the eventual effect of these advances in the tools we use will make our job in surgery not more dazzling and fancier, but easier and safer and more controllable. We have observed this kind of simplifying change as the use of sevoflurane and the L.M.A. have made many procedures easier. These are the crafts, the hands-on work that we do.

But though it is essential, our hands-on skill must not be seen as the unique core of our specialty. In future, with improved tools, skill in clinical anesthesia will be easier to acquire, even by beginners.

Anesthesia outcomes will be uniformly so good there will be little difference detectable between the handiwork of a professor and his students. Excellent outcomes, unquestioned safety, will be the expected norm, as indeed they are now. And future advances in operating rooms will occur only in small increments.

So skill and technology should not be seen as the essential core of our specialty. Good work with our hands will always be important, but it should yield place to superior head work. Our specialty will prosper and grow in influence if we contribute uniquely to the wisdom, the intellectual content of medicine, to clinical knowledge and judgment. We must expand and diversify in these directions. That is why I believe that anesthesiology must assert itself more in critical care medicine, where the particular skills we employ during surgery find a ready application. And the management of chronic pain is a problematic field in which our colleagues are looking to us for leadership and solutions.

With my heart I wish you well as you look hopefully into the future. The countries where you live and labor were my home for thirteen years. For me they were golden years, a time when I embraced the culture of the Middle East and learned to love its people. An ever since then I have felt myself to be one of you. You became my brothers then and have remained so ever since. Please continue to exercise to the full the gifts of hand, head and heart that I admired in you forty years ago. They are gifts from God. And put to wise use, they will lead you and your children into a bright and noble future.

Above all, good friends, remember Solomon. Keep your hearts. Safeguard your capacity for human compassion and caring. Choose always the high ground, and seek the good, the true and the beautiful. As the wise king said, these are the qualities from which will flow the ultimate issues of your lives.

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