

JOHN HAMILTON DSc

Mr Chancellor,

Today many young people in this room have been awarded the honour to call themselves “doctor”, a word which has great power in our society. Strangers will turn to them in times of danger, friends and relatives will expect them to be a font of knowledge, acquaintances will offer to refill their glass while unburdening themselves of countless ills. But what does the word mean? The Oxford dictionary offers 12 meanings to the noun and 6 to the verb including a ship’s cook, an added ingredient to adulterate food and the act of animal castration, but the pivotal meanings relate to learning, for the word derives from the Latin *docere*, to teach.

Today is a day of particular significance since we have seen the first students to emerge from the new medical course shared with our sister university Durham and we seek to honour a man who has played a central role in making this historic day possible; John Hamilton is their teacher. He is a doctor’s doctor.

John’s own medical journey began in 1955 when he entered the medical school at Middlesex Hospital. In those days entrants into any medical school would have joined an almost identical course, beginning with an extensive grounding in human anatomy. Unlike many contemporaries, John was not from a medical dynasty. An early influence had been reading about medical missionaries so it is perhaps not surprising that in 1962 he took his new skills to St Francis Hospital, North Rhodesia, now Zambia. On a pivotal day near the end of his two-year attachment he decided to visit a village and examine all the children, which revealed the

extent of chronic ill health. An old woman had had her head shaved as part of a cleansing of her spirit following the conclusion that a measles outbreak was her fault. If medicine is not grounded in the population, taking account of their beliefs and prejudices, it cannot fulfil its potential.

After seven years back in the bosom of British medicine in London teaching hospitals, he set sail for a new challenge in Canada as head of gastroenterology with a key role in the new medical school at McMaster. Here his credentials as a successful and radical educationalist were forged. He and his colleagues challenged accepted practices; small group tutorials and discussion topics gave rise to an approach which was later to become known internationally as problem based learning. Students without a science background were admitted, African lessons emerged with an emphasis on community experience.

Many would have settled into the security of a fulfilled life. John's wife Alison, whom he had met at medical school, was a qualified obstetrician and their children, Susan and William were first generation Canadians. But the wanderlust was back. In 1978, they were attracted to exploring new horizons and took up the offer to develop a new community based medical school in Nigeria. The Ilorin school set the standard followed by many other schools in Africa and beyond. Village life and the experiences of people in their real lives informed and enriched the medical training.

John's next stop was the Population, Health and Nutrition Department of the World Bank in Washington DC, but the sudden death of the foundation dean at Newcastle on Hunter in Australia resulted in yet another continent being added to the CV. When he arrived in 1984 the

school had only qualified its first year. It had followed the community-based, problem-based learning model and John was the natural person to develop the programme. As in Canada, they faced conservative scepticism but their model proved itself in the quality of its graduates. John had taken on the parallel task of establishing an Accreditation committee for the new Australian Medical Council. During his seventeen years John's strength of personality and conviction won over the sceptics. The focus on communication skills and empathy with patients meant that graduates from Newcastle were recognised to be excellent young doctors.

John had won over another continent to the value of innovative medical education but still he wasn't finished. In 2001 his Odyssey brought him back to the island of his birth and a new challenge which has, in many ways, brought his innovative teaching full circle. With the creation of a Durham cohort of medical students linked to the clinical programme in Newcastle, John has helped restore an historic link. When Durham became England's third university, after Oxford and Cambridge, in 1834, the limited space in Durham City caused medical education to be housed in King's College here in Newcastle, the forerunner of our present faculty. Durham was split in 1963 into two independent institutions, the present Durham University and Newcastle University.

It is worth reflecting on how those first doctors were taught 160 years ago. They would have visited the wards of the old Infirmary but most of their education was apprenticed to the physicians of the city and surrounding countryside. One of them was John Snow whose attachment in a local village coincided with a cholera epidemic which cost the lives of 40,000 people in Tyne & Wear. He was so affected by this experience that he devoted himself to the study of the disease. A decade later he had

realised that the disease in London mapped to the people whose water came from the Thames downstream of the city. He famously persuaded the authorities to take the handle of the Broad street pump to stop the outbreak in Soho and prove that cholera was water borne. I have no doubt that John Snow would have approved of John Hamilton's back to basics approach to medical education. And as the importance of prevention and the influence of lifestyle loom ever larger in significance in our modern practice, the timeless skills John has helped to impart will help "his doctors" to help their patients learn how to care for their own health.

This year brings to an end a career that has spanned more than 50 years and traversed four continents. It is entirely fitting that on this day, for the first time in a generation, medical students who span the academic domain of the old Durham University should qualify and create a new medical tradition, one which is so new it has rediscovered principles that have inspired the teaching of medicine throughout history. He has always been willing to revisit old prejudices. He even swallowed his republican tendencies and accepted an OBE, for services to medical education, in the Queen's Birthday Honours list, something he has been known to describe as "taking the Queen's shilling".

But John's career as an educator is not yet over. He is now a proud grandfather and having last week joined him myself in that exalted status I have no doubt that he will find endless opportunities to practise the skills he has honed in half a century of putting up with medical students.

Mr Chancellor, it gives me special pleasure to recommend that you make John Hamilton, the doctor's doctor, a proper doctor. I commend him to you for the award of the degree of Doctor of Science, honoris causa.

Citation by Professor John Burn