

The true wealth of humanity

According to the social sciences, we live in a new technological civilization, whose most obvious feature is globalization, and, in light of the advances that have occurred in the fields of medicine, biology, embryology, informatics and pharmacology, to cite only the most promising areas, the 21st century will probably be the “century of life”. However, we live in a climate of uncertainty and rapid change, which requires a willingness to learn to reflect, to doubt, to know how to ask questions and to adapt as quickly as possible to an environment in which creativity and innovation play a major role, especially in the field of the life sciences and social problems. This means that we must acknowledge that there is no fixed body of knowledge and brings with it the challenge of building up a wide-ranging normative framework based on the three pillars outlined in UNESCO’s 2005 World Bulletin as providing the foundations for an authentic knowledge society. These are: a) according greater value to existing knowledge; b) adopting a more participatory approach to access to knowledge; and c) better integration of knowledge-generation policies.

It is therefore important to see education as a continuing process of building a human being, along with his or her skills and knowledge, and the capacity to form judgments and act on them. As the process of health and disease cannot be examined in isolation from a social framework, health professionals are obliged to work with collective health and within the Brazilian National Health System (SUS) and it is in these fields that they will be able to contribute to bringing this system in line with a wide-ranging concept of health as the expression of quality of life. There can be no doubt that the world we live in is going through a huge crisis and requires a humanistic approach that is compatible with modern technology and science. It is therefore necessary to foster values that lead us to listen to the cries that come from deep within the human heart and that concern the various dimensions of our existence, such as faith, love, spirituality, solidarity and hope.

The 1st Fernando Figueira Lecture took place in the year 2000, marking the beginning of the academic year at the Instituto de Medicina Integral Prof. Fernando Figueira (IMIP). Its fundamental aim was to shift the focus back to humanistic thinking, to foster creativity and to provide cultural and scientific renovation, as a way to help the Institute live up to our expectations and to avoid the pitfalls that such innovation may give rise to. The aim was thus to reach out, in a concrete and appropriate fashion, to the real lives of those who suffer and thereby help to reduce social inequalities. The 3rd Lecture held on 3 September this year, followed the agenda of the IMIP’s fiftieth anniversary year by focusing on the issue of the “Causes of the Increasing Decline in Child Malnutrition in the Northeast Region of Brazil (1986-1996-2006)”, delivered by Professor Carlos Augusto Monteiro, of the Epidemiological Research in Nutrition and Health Unit of the University of São Paulo.

There can be no denying that commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the IMIP shows that the institution is generally committed to the task of changing the way that human development occurs, by incorporating health into the new paradigms, new ethical values, new expectations and new commitments, while remaining fully cognizant of the principles on which the SUS rests. It is for this reason that events such as the Fernando Figueira Lectures address a diversity of issues, with varying perspectives and are guided by the need for constant reflection. They are thus able to produce ideas and scientific work the results of which may enrich the country. Similar cultural and scientific events have been held over the years, such as the setting up of the pioneering “Revista do IMIP”, which has now enjoyed 14 uninterrupted years of publication by the Revista Brasileira de Saúde Materno Infantil since 2001. This has become a point of reference in the field of mother and child health in Brazil as a whole and across Latin America, and is indexed in 11 international bibliographical databases. This demonstrates the maturity of the IMIP and its ability to produce new knowledge through practice in a way that neither shows disrespect for the past and the memories derived from it nor neglects the infinite possibilities that the future may hold. This encourages people to believe that knowledge has the ability to transform society by becoming more sensitive to the needs of its less-privileged members.

Neither should we neglect historical analysis of similar experiences at home or abroad; since, as the philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, put it, “the greatest ideas are also the greatest events”. Likewise, we should

not forget that time and the events that fill it is now flying, not just passing by; and that space is not simply a stage for human action, but something constructed by human beings, collectively and as individuals, and is an indispensable part of our social relations, imbued with meanings that change over time. This, in our view, is the most challenging task of these new times—to reconfigure human development. Roberto Rodrigues remarks (in his article, Happiness and Happenstance, in the Folha de São Paulo newspaper, 28/08/2010, p.B14) on one auspicious fact: “Discussion has been underway at the UN of the index of human values, which uses the bases of education and health to measure the expectations, dreams, aspirations and perceptions of society and to guide public policy. This goes further than the human development index, which only measures health, education and life expectancy”. This brings to mind one of the finest and most important lessons provided by Fernando Figueira: that “[T]he true wealth of humanity lies in the good we do for others”.

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