

# Medical ethics and the Commonwealth

*by A. A. Sandosham*

AT THE LAST MEETING of the Council of the Commonwealth Medical Association held in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, the writer discussed some of the problems of medical ethics in Malaysia. It was suggested that similar problems were probably confronted in some of the other countries of the Commonwealth all of which had based their ethical code on the British pattern which, in turn, has been modelled on the conventional rules of behaviour of our profession as laid down by the big-wigs of Greece nearly 2,400 years ago. It is true that sporadic attempts have been made to modify the Hippocratic oath but none of them has adequately met the changing views of this atomic age.

Even more important is the need to adapt the ethical rules to reflect local conditions and take into account the cultural background, religious beliefs and social development of the people served. With this end in view, the suggestion was made that the Commonwealth Medical Association sets up a sub-committee to study this problem and make recommendations that could be the basis for the National Medical Associations to modify their own ethical codes. The Singapore Medical Association and the Malaysian Medical Association were to undertake this task and get in touch with the Commonwealth countries.

Dr. Gwee Ah Leng of Singapore has put forward certain suggestions for consideration which

have not received the concurrence of some of his colleagues. He is of the opinion that the elaboration of disciplines within medicine produces doctors with interests different from that of the care or relief of a patient alone. There are those who may feel committed to the interest of progress of pure knowledge and others concerned with the weal of the community as a whole rather than that of the individual patient. He thinks that ultimately we should evolve a separate code of ethics to suit the different groups.

The Malaysian Medical Association has not put forward its views on the subject yet. It may be desirable for it to organise a symposium on medical ethics and get speakers to introduce various aspects of the subject for open discussion so that we can consolidate our views in relation to the local setting. One can think of many topics for discussion at such a forum, including the legal aspects of medical ethics, abortions, sterilisation, ethics in medical education, professional secrecy, organ transplantation, human experimentation, society's claims on the profession, euthanasia and eugenics. The early formulation of our stand on this matter is desirable since in the revised Constitution of the Commonwealth Medical Association, it is proposed to include the basic principles of medical ethics acceptable to the Commonwealth member countries.