Academic Medicine: Reclaiming the Forest from the Trees
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Summary
University medical centres, once the pinnacle of physician education and patient care, have come under intense fire. Critics question their utility, purpose, and ability to sustain and improve health care outcomes. The author argues that these centres must overhaul their reward structure in order to realign their culture with the original, noble mission of academic medicine.

Résumé
Les centres hospitaliers universitaires, autrefois le summum en matière d’enseignement aux médecins et de soins aux patients, essuient maintenant d’importantes critiques. Les observateurs questionnent leur utilité, leur finalité et leur capacité de soutenir et d’améliorer les résultats en matière de soins de santé. L’auteur soutient que ces centres se doivent de réviser la structure de leur système de rétribution afin de ramener leur culture à leur noble mission d’origine, celle de la médecine universitaire.

University medical centres (UMCs), once the pinnacle of physician education and patient care, have come under intense fire. Critics question their utility, purpose, and ability to sustain and improve health care outcomes. These ivory towers of academia have become a collection of loosely connected and largely autonomous silos with narrowly defined, self-serving agendas. Their fundamental role – to improve the health of society – has been eroded.

An academy is a society or institution of distinguished scholars, artists or scientists, that aims to promote and sustain standards in their field. Despite this noble purpose, the academic function of UMCs has become “abstract, impractical and even moot” – and even potentially harmful. Can we recover some of this lost meaning and, in so doing, help to revitalize academia?

“Academics” has an interesting and storied past, dating back to classical Athens, Greece (circa 500 to 300 BCE). At that time, formal education was traditionally limited to primary school, which was completed by adolescence. This model was revolutionized by Plato, and the establishment of his legendary Academy in 387 BCE. His primary mission and teachings, referred to as Platonic philosophy or Platonism, focused on the improvement of society. He strived to transform his students into virtuous and learned leaders, political and otherwise, who would be capable of effecting change at the highest levels.

In his day and beyond, Plato’s Academy enjoyed unprecedented success. Heralded as the harbinger of the modern university, it became a catalyst for major innovations in mathematics, science, philosophy, and politics – and a wellspring of numerous influential leaders. Over and above improving contemporary Athenian culture, the extraordinary accomplishments of the Academy had an enormous impact on shaping the foundations of Western civilization.

These accomplishments are a testament to the value of steadfast commitment to a primary objective: societal improvement. The Academy had a clear curriculum, composed of specific, rationally selected subjects. The central preparatory subjects were branches of mathematics, consisting of arithmetic, astronomy, acoustics, and geometry. Plato held that the lessons in reasoning inherent in these areas were critical to the understanding of more advanced subjects, especially philosophy.
Academics were thus empowered to lead their communities and their nation into an enriched future.

In pursuing their mission, Plato and the academics vehemently maintained a clear distinction between their means – the Academy’s preparatory subjects – and their ends – the improvement of society. Plato understood the pitfalls of obscuring this distinction and allowing the supportive subjects to become ends in and of themselves. As one scholar aptly summarized, “The virtue and purpose which [Plato] saw in mathematics would be utterly lost and perverted if it were so practiced as to lead the mind down to particulars instead of up toward the incorporeal and unchanging realities.”

Thus, we can see the enormous potential an institution has if it focuses on its primary mission. It also serves as a revealing backdrop against which to compare the recent faltering course of contemporary academia. The original mission of academic medicine, stated in 1497, was “the pursuit of health in the service of society.” Over the past several decades, this global vision has been fractionated into the well-known tripartite missions of research, medical education, and clinical service. UMCs now fund and promote particular components of the academic triad, conferring greater import on certain “sub-missions.” As a result, internal tension and unhealthy competition exist, undermining collaboration and co-operation.

These divisions have evolved into distinct pursuits in and of themselves, creating a dislocated, silo-like disorganization of clinicians, researchers, and educators. We have lost sight of our fundamental purpose: we have lost the forest for the trees.

Academic revitalization requires a return to our roots. We need to re-emphasize societal health as our ultimate goal. This re-emphasis will require a dramatic shift in the way we understand and use research and medical education. UMCs must regain control over these increasingly autonomous and powerful entities. They need to be redirected back to their original functions: to support and advance patient care.

In order to effectively harness the disparate forces of clinicians, researchers, and educators, UMCs must overhaul their reward structure. Academic rewards – promotion, recognition, tenure, and funding – must be linked, proportionately, to outcomes that improve societal health. Over time, with ongoing explicit reinforcement of patient-centred efforts, the culture of the UMC will realign with the original, noble mission of academic medicine. We will have reclaimed the forest from the trees.

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References