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The Changing Concept of the Ideal Physician

THE INCREASING CONCERN WITH ETHICAL ISSUES in medical practice and research over the last fifteen years exemplifies a striking change in the image of doctors and the relationship between physicians and patients. Where previously physicians' decisions were rarely questioned, patients are now frequently sceptical and may doubt both the physician's motives and judgement. Concurrently there has been a rise in concern about the nature of the physician's act and a strengthened interest in teaching physicians how to be doctors as opposed to merely teaching the scientific basis of medical practice. During the latter part of his career, Walsh McDermott was interested in Samaritanism—the human dimension of the physician-patient relationship. Because good medical care of necessity involves some degree of altruism on the part of physicians, he was interested in what fosters this altruism or defeats it. These changes in the relations of physicians and patients and the manifest interest in some systematic understanding of problems such as altruism represent a startling evolution over what is, historically, but a brief period.

Sorting out the contributory factors is complex. These changes in the conceptions of physicians and physicianship occurred during the period in which science had its most profound impact on the ideals of medicine and in which technology entered medicine on a grand scale. This all occurred at a time when the surrounding society was also undergoing a profound shift in its self-understanding. Let me use four brief points to summarize the argument.

