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FRIDAY, MARCH 16, 2012

Mirror! Mirror! On the Wall, Who is the 'best' of us all!!

An open letter to the Vice Chancellor of Dr MGR Medical University.
Respected Sir,

This letter is with respect to the numerous awards that were distributed on the occasion of Dentist's day. I must thank you for recognizing the specialty of dentistry and deeming it fit to reward numerous persons who have contributed to the profession. While appreciating the fact that some senior dentists were given 'life time' awards based on their long standing contribution, I was a little taken aback by the awards for 'best teacher' and 'best dentist'. Surprisingly there were several bests, which is an anachronism by itself. As a qualified ethicist I tried to analyze the logic and rationale of naming several persons as a 'best' doctor or 'best' dentist. 'Best' is a superlative word which means that the quality is unparalleled. It does not merely mean 'having good qualities'. It in fact means 'most good' (the word of course does not exist). So who defines best amongst practitioners? To every patient, his/ her dentist is the best dentist. That is the reason why the patient has chosen somebody as his/her dentist. By that logic, the dentist who sees the most number of patients is possibly the best dentist. Of course, I do not agree with that criterion alone because 'best' may also have to do with the quality of work which a patient may not be able to technically evaluate. The 'best' can also be someone who has good 'people skills'. One can also define 'best' clinician as the person who is most compassionate or charitable. It can also be the person who offers 'best' treatment on a 'value for money' scale. As you can see the concept of best is a complex one. More importantly, it is arbitrary. The University has chosen to raise a hornet's nest by selecting a 'few bests' from amongst approximately 10,000 registered dentists in the country. I can only think that the criterion was arbitrary and is likely to earn the displeasure of several others who may themselves feel that they deserved it. Thousands may be disappointed, but failure to express sentiments should not be construed as acceptance or approbation. I have written openly because I do not practice general dentistry and am clearly not in the contention. Most importantly, I can give it in writing that I certainly would not be the best by any stretch of imagination, even if I did practice dentistry. I must reiterate that I am writing this letter after much deliberation, as I do not wish to hurt the feelings of the several persons who have received 'best' awards in various aspects of dentistry on the occasion of the Dentist Day celebration. I have no doubt that the University has decided to honour several dentists with the best of intentions. I am also certain that several of the awardees are also worthy dentists and teachers and truly deserved recognition. My only objection to the awards is on the use of the term 'best' when recognizing some of these individuals.

With regard to 'Best Teachers', I am not sure if your office relied on student feedbacks or data submitted by the staff themselves. If it was based on student feedbacks, let me humbly submit that the best teachers for them are the most lenient ones. All of us have been students at some point of time or the other. Students are also fond of teachers who award liberal marks and mingle with them socially. There is general agreement that teachers should be evaluated (if at all) on the basis of pedagogy rather than popularity. This would be impossible given the time and resources

available to us. As for inviting self application, I think the notion is basically self defeating. A truly good teacher may not actually offer himself/ herself for such a competition. Pedagogy is a personal attribute that should not lend itself to comparison with other similar professionals. Again, I must assure you that I am not a teacher and am clearly not in contention.

My reason for writing this letter is largely based on several letters and verbal comments, I have received in confidence pointing out the arbitrary nature of the award system. I have also unconfirmed reports that some of the 'best teachers' were in fact part time teachers who are shown as full time teachers. If this is true, this has the potential to cause much embarrassment to the University. I hope there will be no faux pas. I wish to assure you that this letter is not meant to criticize the award, awarder or the awardees. It is only an opinion based on fairly sound principles of ethics and conflict of interests. I hope the University stops the practice of awarding 'best' titles in the future. On the other hand recognizing merit and contribution based on material evidence and judged by their peers or an impartial panel is certainly welcome.

Regards

George Paul
