

It Is Only the Ignorant Who Despise Education

“It is only the ignorant who despise education.”

Publius Cyrus, Latin Poet, 43-85 AD

Recently, my spouse and I celebrated a milestone birthday and anniversary by traveling on safari in East Africa. Besides the abundant and fascinating wildlife, we spent a considerable amount of time discussing with our guides and drivers the current demographic, cultural, and educational aspects of their respective countries, Kenya and Tanzania. These conversations, taken with a fair amount of background reading, led to the comments in this editorial. Our African colleagues were convinced that a key element required to improve the quality of life for the average person in their societies must involve widespread, universal education. Without this, critical measures in public health, food production, and good governmental practices would not be accomplished.

As I thought about their comments, it became clear to me that they were right. The future economic and physical health of the citizenry in Africa demands widespread education of the population. Ignorance in this magnificent continent has led to much unnecessary pain, misery, and death already. For a number of years in the Republic of South Africa, individuals in national and local government blamed the human immunodeficiency virus/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome epidemic on neocolonialism and witchcraft. Clearly, such views would have been hard to sustain if the majority of the population in that country had been better educated and had thought critically concerning the actual etiology and epidemiology of this devastating illness.

To a lesser but no less threatening degree, ignorance and failure to value the critical importance of education also exists in our own highly developed society. In my own state and others throughout the US, there are a number of people who espouse the following philosophy: “I became a success without needing a higher education, and therefore, such training is not an essential requirement for current younger members of our society.” In my

opinion, an attitude such as this also will lead to much pain, suffering, and death in coming generations. Indeed, it has been demonstrated repeatedly that one’s likelihood of good health and longevity in our highly developed society is directly related to the socioeconomic and educational level to which an individual belongs. Of course, demographic and educational measures frequently predict access to positive health-related behaviors that favor well-being and longevity.^{1,2}

Let us briefly examine the reasons why the current younger generation needs extensive education. Even the most rudimentary understanding of the wellsprings of physical and mental health requires knowledge of a large body of material concerning basic biology, physics, and chemistry. Otherwise, unhealthy lifestyle choices may be made, and individuals may be lulled into believing preposterous claims by charlatans bent only on extracting their money and not the least bit interested in fostering their health or well-being.

Furthermore, selecting qualified candidates for local and national office requires the ability to understand the economic, social, and demographic structures and operations of various aspects of our complex society. Without such knowledge, the citizens of the US could easily be misled into accepting facile and potentially dangerous policy decisions suggested by various elements in the leadership of our land.

Finally, current and future employers will demand a workforce with greater and greater skill levels involving considerable ability in communication skills, mathematics, and the use of electronic technology. Without extensive basic and higher education, our younger citizens will not be able to meet the demands just outlined.

These opinions also are being advanced in Africa by responsible, educated leaders such as Wangari Maathai, the 2004 recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize for her groundbreaking work in organizing grassroots movements for change and improvement in the lives of thousands of Africans. In her book, *The Challenge for Africa*,³ Ms. Maathai points out numerous ways that education and planning can foster a better and healthier life for her countrymen. She suggests that “The current crisis offers Africa a useful lesson and its greatest challenge: nobody knows the solution to every problem; rather than blindly following prescriptions of others, Africans need

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to think and act for themselves, and learn from their mistakes." Education and careful reflection followed by action are essential to her program. To ignore her message would be as disastrous for her fellow citizens as it would be for our own. The future will belong to individuals with sophisticated educations in science, economics, communication, and history. I am convinced that anything less than this will lead to widespread economic hardship, unhappiness, and poor health for the citizens of my state as well as that of other states. I urge our leaders to accept the task of educating the next generation as their most important undertaking. As always, feel free to comment on this editorial or other *Journal* articles on our blog at <http://amjmed.blogspot.com>.

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