

Should We Make a Provision for Joint Medicine-Law Training Programmes?

Dr. Ashoka Jahnavi Prasad

In my pre-teenaged and teenaged days, many students used to devour upon self-help tomes authored by Orison Swett Marden; there was no Deepak Chopra in those days ! Marden's self-help books were bestsellers and rage at the time not only with the youngsters but also with the adults. They had been translated into more than 54 languages and the Hindi version was quite frequently found at the Wheeler's Bookstalls at nearly all the major North Indian Railway Stations.

It always used to fascinate me how one person could be so well versed in so many different disciplines. Most of his counsels and suggestions were of a practical nature and it was especially noteworthy that he was most comfortable offering suggestions on matters that involved either a medical or a legal dimension. I happened to read his biography a few years later and to my surprise discovered that he had formal training both as a physician as well as a lawyer.

Much later when I was contemplating over a career in medicine, I could see the interface between medicine and law and it always used to perplex me why there were so few legally qualified physicians or medically qualified lawyer. As a young medical student, I used to hear anecdotal tales about a senior professor of internal medicine in Lucknow viz Dr K B Kunwar, who had decided to train as a lawyer while still functioning as a medical professor and had managed to procure

the foremost honours in his second vocation with the Lucknow University. He never actually got around to enrolling himself as an attorney, which I suspect was because of the very stringent Bar Council regulation that still persists; one cannot be enrolled as an advocate if he/she is actively involved in another profession.

When I relocated abroad, I came across a remarkable colleague at the Queen Charlotte's Hospital, London where I was working as a lecturer. Dame Rosalind Hurley was one of the foremost microbiologists in the United Kingdom. I was flabbergasted to learn that she had been called to the Bar at the Middle Temple and was in a habit of arguing her own legal cases whenever possible.

England, however, already had a tradition of individuals trained both in medicine and law many of whom aspired to become coroners. Ros Hurley clearly did not fit the bill and her foray into the legal profession was primarily to gain insight and erudition into another professional field. I also discovered that the then General Secretary of the British Medical Association, Dr John Havard was also a qualified barrister.

Delving into history, I discovered that another of my favorites, viz Louis Blanqui, a French gentleman who enunciated the principles of socialism considerably before Karl Marx (and in my view in a much clearer manner) was also dually qualified as a physician and a lawyer.

My own family's association with the legal profession goes back to the 18th century on my father's side and 19th century on my mother's side. And it had remained uninterrupted — my late father himself was a judge — until I decided to opt for the medical profession. I am not surer but perhaps it was to ensure this continuity that I prompted me to train as a barrister on a part time basis at the Lincoln's Inn and later on



Dr. Ashoka Jahnavi Prasad is identified as the most educationally qualified person in the world by The Polymath. He has a dynamic resume with a PhD in history of medicine from Cambridge, LLM from Harvard among other notable qualifications. Dr. Prasad has also worked as a consultant to the World Health Organization (WHO) and helped prepare two of their reports.

I worked to obtain a Masters in Law (Mental Health Legislation) from the Harvard Law School.

I can confidently say that having this additional qualification has always been a help as it serves to provide me with a new perspective. For instance, it enabled me to assist in the development of the Mental Health Act in Seychelles. It has also helped me in my human rights campaigns for the rights of the mentally ill.

Admirers of Erich Segal's unputdownable books would recall that one of the prime characters in his well-researched bestseller named 'Doctors' is Bennett Landsman, an Afro-American surgeon who has to give up the surgical profession because of a hand injury and become a very capable attorney after additional training as a lawyer.

Fiction apart, there is an instance, which I believe, has no parallels. Josiah Bartlett was a physician in New Hampshire who became the Chief Justice of the

New Hampshire Supreme Court (in 1788) and some of his landmark judgments are still cited not just in the United States but all over the world. I would stand corrected, but to the best of my knowledge this is the only instance of a physician heading a Supreme Court in a democratic country.

Holding a dual qualification in medicine and law is always profitable not just for those aspiring careers as coroners or forensic pathologists or members of the medical indemnity organizations but even for run of the mill medical practitioners. At least three medical schools in the United States have already commenced a joint MD/JD programme where students after successful completion emerge both as physicians and attorneys.

I should be most interested whether replicating that in India would be meaningful. At least we should have a very serious debate on the matter.



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