Speech by Dr. Alan Gregg at the Montreal Neurological Institute, November 20, 1953

MEDICAL INSTITUTES

Your Excellency, Mr. Chancellor, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I shall avoid a common practice of speakers, namely to begin so far away from the subject that their hearers, more nearly captive than captivated, sit in strained bewilderment, which the speaker misinterprets as interest, though actually they are waiting for some reasonable clue as to what he has chosen as the subject of his talk. I am going to talk of institutes in the field of medicine: not of this Institute but rather more broadly and generically of medical institutes, their nature, purposes, and component parts.

Having thus advised you of my direction and destination these remarks will now admittedly begin at some distance from the subject, the better to locate it in the matrix of the facts that make the kind of human associations we call institutes important now and for the morrow of Medicine.

By a notable if not, indeed, a very remarkable quality of human intelligence we are at times able to guess that some statement is probably important even when we cannot honestly say we fully understand it. My younger years were studded with experiences of this sort, often elusive, sometimes incomprehensible, but nearly always memorable. Consequently I came to relish Swedenborg's definition of revelation as "a clouding over or obscuring of Divine Truth." Such experiences were not to be dismissed with the easy apostrophe of "important if true." They

were more arresting than that, for they deserved the comment "important if understandable."

Now among such revelations - in the Swedenborgian sense - that I remember vividly was a remark made at Oxford to my chief Dr. Richard M. Pearce. I cannot trust my memory but I think it was Sherrington who made it. It ran in this wise: "After some hundreds of years of experience we think we have learned here in Oxford how to teach what is known. But now with the undeniable upsurge of scientific research, we cannot continue to rely on the mere fact that we have learned how to teach what is known. We must learn how to teach the best attitude to what is not yet known. This also may take centuries to acquire but we cannot escape this new challenge - nor do we want to."

I knew at the time that that statement was important but I also knew that it would take me time to understand it. It has. Even after some thirty years I cannot be sure I understand all its implications. For example, it is profitable to regard an institute in one of the clinical branches of medicine as the right way to teach the best attitude to what is not yet known? Is learning the right attitude to the unknown the vital core of this new form of association we call an institute? I think it probably is. But even more probable, I think it is wise to reflect on what institutes are, suspending final decision until we see the matter as a whole. I wonder, for example, whether the research method will not transform the structure, the methods and the purpose of all of university education in, say, the next five decades. And what of secondary education? Indeed will education as a whole not be profoundly changed? Is an institute the forerunner and the prototype of higher education in the future?

For still another reason some increased reflection upon what we call institutes may be needed today and in the future. All human institutions must reckon with two forces. Their resulting conduct represents a sort of parallelogram of forces. One is the inherent intent to supply stability of purpose and effort, the other is to be promptly and delicately responsive to changes in the environment and even changes in objectives. The French economist Francis Delaisi had an interesting interpretation of institutions: their purpose, he held, was to supply the stability needed for long-term operations. For the long-term operation of raising a family we have the institution of marriage. For the raising of crops we have the various institutions of real property, land tenure etc., so that he who ploughs may reap. For manufacture and commerce we have banks. For education we have schools and universities. Indeed Delaisi was so impressed by the constancy with which institutions supply stability for human effort that he came to regard stability no longer as a mere characteristic of institutions but rather as the essential purpose of institutions - namely to provide the stability that men and women of tenacious purpose require for bringing long-term operations to a successful end.

And yet we cannot safely exalt our need for stability and continuity to be the end-all and be-all of an institution. We must needs adjust the institution to change - or see it perish of its own brittleness. Who can deny that stability can be pushed too far? It was Bertrand Russell I believe who suggested a new and impish form of conjugating various verbs: "I am firm, you are insistent, he is pigheaded" or "I think, you cerebrate, he theorizes" or "I am open-minded, you are uncertain, he

is positively schizoid." Obviously even excellent resolves and policies can be pushed too far - there comes a time when it is reasonable to dispense with reasons. Even certainty, stability and determination have their proper limits. As Oscar Wilde observed "When you break the little laws the big laws begin to operate."

And so with human institutions: stability must reckon with adjustability if we are to be concerned with survival. Nearly all institutions, and a fortiori institutes, maintain a precarious balance between opposing forces; tenacity in the face of adaptability, stability risking extinction in a world forever changing.

If the very survival of human associations depends upon the skill with which they steer between the Scylla of senseless rigidity and the Charybdis of unpredictably erratic changefulness, then what is the wise course in these singularly changeful times in which we live? For clearly we live at a time when the circumstances of daily life are changing more rapidly than they have ever changed in man's experience. As Elton Mayo insisted ours is an adaptive not a traditional civilization. What tradition could we consult to guide our conduct in point of atomic bombs, jet planes, and television, antibiotics, ACTH, artificial insemination and even artificial rainstorm? What guidance is there in the Hippocratic Oath for the problems of birth control? There is no mention even of Preventive Medicine in that Oath.

For these reasons and their cumulative impact on our traditional forms of living and working together, I would insist that we would be wise to hold our medical institutes up to careful review - not because I suspect there is something wrong about them, but because it is so

important to know exactly what is right about them, and thus what we can count on. Goethe held that it is important to know as much as possible about what you want most of all, because sooner or later you are so likely to obtain it.

Medical institutes generically have for me two leading characteristics, one that of a deliberate independent identity and the other that of something initiated or originated for a new and specific purpose. The words "task force" connote an ad hoc specified focus of attention and energy. One might say, if the new phrase has not already become a cliché, that an institute is an institutionalized task force.

Now the advantages of having a declared and recognized separate status for an institute in a university depend in large measure on the way in which it articulates with other members of the body corporate. I like my arms to have separate parts articulating with each other by means of strong, supple and painless joints, though of course complete rigidity from shoulder to finger tips might appeal to the administrative principles of uniformity, simplicity of control and predictability of behavior. Clearly an arm with several separate units articulating painlessly, freely and yet tightly works far more effectively than a single rigid unit. Everything depends on the quality of the joints. By the same token the character of an institute's articulations with other members of the university decides whether you will be partners in a beautifully supple and adroit instrument, or contributors to acute rheumatic inflammation or a chronic anchylosing arthropathy - in simpler terms and fewer syllables - a flail instead of an arm.

There are other reasons for an institute to have recognizable identity. Separate status provides a focal point not only for the loyal

energies of its members but also for the interest of its actual and potential supporters. Human loyalty seeks visible, tangible objects of manageable proportions....need I expatiate on the theme of loyalty to the clan of Scots descendants in Montreal? Sir James Barrie acting as toastmaster at a dinner in London on St. Andrew's Night opened with the remark "I have always thought that it was right and proper for the Scots resident in London to assemble at least once a year and examine that grave question: is there any defect in the Scot's character?" Though apparently a purely rhetorical question it could perhaps have well been answered by another question (for Charles Lamb says that a Scotsman "lives in a twilight of dubiety"), namely "is there not a limit to the extent to which clannish loyalty can wisely go"?

Besides serving the purpose of stability and continuity both of effort and of the best circumstances for effort, an institute can help to stimulate as well as to reassure its members. By the very self-imposed circumscription of its size and ambit an institute can provide an extraordinary aid to human effort and satisfaction - namely the chance to be intimate with excellence. Whether we invoke memory, or bear witness to our present and immediate experience, who of us will set a trivial value upon intimacy with excellence? If that intimacy be sacrificed, whether because of increased size or excessive busyness, then the members of any institute can look at each other in justifiable dismay.

Granted that an institute articulates smoothly and well with other parts of the university and that its members are loyal and devoted, and that its size and activity actually permit, as well as

theoretically encourage, excellence to be attained and be felt, there is one more purpose an institute must serve. Not only must there be a differentiation of function and a division of labor amongst its members, but there should be an air of expectancy among them: expectancy not merely that each will do his expected task well but that in some way not yet clear each will bring to the work of the institute something distinctly and peculiarly his own, and at his own good time will add something unique to what may be expected of one in his position. A division of labor that is not accompanied by the enhancement of personal dignity and individuality offers no permanent solution to the difficulties of collaborative work. My phrase 'the atmosphere of expectancy' refers to the value of realizing that men can be more than the positions they occupy, and that in medicine, as in art, there remains for each of us the problem of style. This shows in a comment I remember about Dr. Rea here in McGill. "It wasn't merely that he was a good teacher: he was. But it was the <u>way</u> he taught and lived." That kind of comment is healthy and it is bracing. The members of Institutes cannot be wasting time when they brood upon the problem of style - for both teaching and research are ways of life.

The greatest and deepest need of a medical institute is to be needed. The immediate and the long-remembered success of many an <u>ad hoc</u> organization came quite simply from the fact that it met a cogent and widely recognized need. Indeed the kudos and honor of some emergency organizations, once their task is done, becomes so extraordinary that mere membership becomes a much sought after honor - in short the organization becomes honorific and no longer meets any need more urgent than that of ambitious vanity.

Now there are needs that are recognized and there are needs that are unrecognized. To create an institute to meet a need that is widely felt and already formulated requires no mean abilities: to institute an organization to meet a need not yet perceived by most men calls for quite exceptional talents. But the cardinal question must always remain - is there a real need? Furthermore there is a delicate question nearly always of great practical importance, the question of timing, for it is quite possible to organize an institute so long before the need it will meet is generally recognized that support for the institute cannot be found in time to save it.

As one who has had thirty years' experience, both direct and vicarious, with widely different forms of financial support to institutes and departments of medicine and surgery and various special fields, I believe that endowment - whether from government or private sources - is the soundest way to secure optimum results when it is certain the work to be done is needed. The steady confidence that is conferred by endowment calls out from scientists honesty and steadfastness of purpose: the hesitant uncertainty of short-term grants all but insults the intelligence if not the sincerity of the recipient and certainly makes a mockery of long-term planning. Experience is our teacher in this matter. Indeed it cannot be news to some of you that a reaction has set in against short-term grants. They have favored hasty work on trivial questions. They dissuade the more honest and circumspect young men from entering investigative careers. Though there are occasions when $50,000 a year for two years may be needed for some urgent problem I would prefer the income from that sum, $4,500, as dependable: that is my considered judgment.

You will notice that till now I have not referred to the leader of an institute but only to the members. Now the days when men at 24 or even younger took command of whaling ships as captains, have gone. Perhaps the earlier frontier universities of the past hundred years gave comparably early responsibility to young men in academic life. But as the preparatory stages become longer and the candidates more numerous we may expect to see more rarely the load of leadership of institutes falling on men when they are really young. Perhaps the only thing I find myself wanting to say to most new leaders of institutes is this: you'll find the task a little lonelier than you expected. As a corrective you may do well to find someone not on the payroll, a man of perfect discretion and considerable detachment with whom you can discuss your problems with complete freedom and confidence. Indeed there is some evidence suggesting that some of the most successful leaders of medical institutes took counsel quietly and steadily with one or two advisers. Certainly Simon Flexner relied on William H. Welch in that way.

The best leaders of scientific institutes whom I have known had only this in common: they made their values known and felt throughout the organization. I used to be puzzled that success as the head of an institute seemed to reward so wide a variety of temperaments, capacities and characters. There didn't seem to be any one formula to explain the leader's role. At long last I came to see that what a leader transmits is the quality and the variety of his values, for he is quick to recognize and encourage in others those qualities, purposes and interests that seem most significant to him.

One other aspect of leadership in a scientific institute relates to the number of men on its staff. If we are to take seriously the opinion of students of administration we should be critical of the leader who has more than eight men reporting to him. Doubtless leaders vary in point of the number of colleagues with whom they can work effectively, to whose work they can bring discriminating and helpful encouragement and criticism, and of whose lives they can be effectively informed. Eight may not always be the maximum, but of one thing I am sure: the capacity to work with others has not increased as rapidly as the technology of travel and communication has become quick, cheap and easy to initiate. No sooner did we put in inter-office telephones than staff lunch or tearooms became necessary. When the body possesses the lymphatic system, the circulatory system and the nervous system each devoted to some form of transport, communication and coordination, we may well suspect that the factor to pay most attention to in deciding the size of an institute is not the possible work to be done, nor the number of possible subdepartments, nor the size of its budget, nor the number of candidates for staff positions, nor the size of similar institutions elsewhere, but something more stark and searching - the quality of communications between its members, their clarity, brevity, completeness, promptness, and sincerity. That is what makes an Institute.

Directly related to the most desirable size of an institute and also of capital importance to the future, stands the subject of recruitment. Rather than attempt to review many of its aspects I would like now merely to submit for your consideration a new word and the

need I feel for it. The word is decruitment. Recruitment comes from the French re-croitre to grow again. It has not quite the same meaning as increase but rather the idea of replacement of expected losses. But in some of the best institutes I've known nobody wants to leave. What is needed is a decruitment policy, as clear and automatic and impartial as can be, with this new specific word decruitment as impersonal as a uniform and without any overtones of disapproval, failure or disappointment. The policy of decruitment means that all recruits ought to leave after a stipulated period of two or perhaps four years and those that are wanted back can be called back after a lapse of not less than a year. Like retirement policies whose application becomes more invidious with every infraction, recruitment without any policy of decruitment seems insincere. Indeed it seems ominous. It suggests to me one of the common characteristics of cancer cells - they lack self-control. So I commend to you a new word - decruitment - to draw attention to what is needed in place of the shoddy euphemism "he was let go," as though he was straining at the leash and choking for departure - which he was not, and everyone knew it. We can have something cleaner than that.

Having referred to institutes in terms of their purposes and the role of membership, leadership, size and ways of self-renewal, I come to the subject of trustees or other forms of control and supervision. Here, too, rather than try to cover the subject, I would underscore one aspect of trusteeship that deserves more attention than it seems to receive. There are not enough Trustees who brood over the affairs of our institutes. Now brooding as a word may connote to some of you meanings I do not have in mind. I do not mean by brooding fussy and officious

interference, nor gloomy preoccupation with problems that can't be briskly solved, nor plausible arguments that the ship is sinking and should be scuttled in favor of some coracle made of balsa wood. No. By brooding I mean first a thorough working knowledge of the institute's affairs and then what its problems are, what are the unseen needs it could be meeting, what is dubious and what is certain in its future, and especially whether in objective, as well as in performance, the institute is striking the right balance between stability and adjustability, between unflinching adherence to existing purposes and a suppleness of adaptation to a constantly changing world of knowledge and of need. By brooding I mean the constant weighing of what is against what could be, the steady, quiet evaluation of the potentialities as well as the actualities of the institute. A good brooder is at home in the subjunctive, in the language of unreality, for the future almost by definition is not yet real.

Using such criteria we come to face the undeniable fact that the quality of trusteeship in our institutes deserves itself some brooding. Indeed brooding has been the key in which this talk is written. Too vague, perhaps, too general and too inclusive. So let me close in a contrasting vein of specific, local and exclusively historical fact.

In but very few if any of the enterprises to which The Rockefeller Foundation has been privileged to contribute in the last twenty years have the results equalled those you have created here in this Neurological Institute. If I were asked to name a single grant that the Medical Sciences Division of the Foundation has made since 1931 that I consider ideal in purpose, in performance, in local response

and in national and international influence, and in the character of our relationships maintained from the very beginning, I would say without a moment's hesitation the grant to the Neurological Institute of McGill University. But that is only one way and perhaps a trivial one of expressing the admiration and the satisfaction The Rockefeller Foundation has for what you have created here. More rare still is the compliment I would offer you, not without some fear that it will fail its target, in saying that in this Neurological Institute, the Staff, the Chief and the Trustees are so beautifully fused into one shining amalgam that if I were to name one to thank I would be naming you all who have worked with him, for him and through him, and if I were to name all of you it would come to the same thing - for you are all the Neurological Institute of McGill University, each to the other, responsible, essential and inseparable.

(signed) Alan Gregg