

Narrow Labelling of People's Social and Political Beliefs

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In today's culture, at least in the USA, there is a tendency to narrowly categorize people, regarding their social, political, and economic points of view. For example, people are narrowly identified as either "conservative" or "liberal;" "right wing" or "left wing;" Republican, Democrat, Independent, or Libertarian. The terms "progressive" and "conservative" are assumed to be incompatible, which need not be the case. The concept of spectrum is either ignored or under-appreciated, as is the possibility that a single individual's political leanings may not be categorizable under a single label.

When I have pondered the current cultural tendency to judge and label individuals according to a narrow categorization scheme, I have thought of the very best physicians I have known over my 50 year career in Medicine. In my opinion and experience, the very best physicians are those who, in their practice of Medicine, are conservative, progressive, liberal, radical, and revolutionary—all at the same time. They are not just one of those things, they are all of those things. One label does not adequately characterize them; several labels apply, including labels that may seem contradictory, at least on the surface.

For example, excellent physicians are conservative in that they want to preserve principles, practices, and behaviors that have served patients well and have stood the test of time. They believe it is still important to see patients in person, to perform at least certain aspects of a physical exam, to actually touch patients and look them in the eye. Bedside manner is still important. Informed consent is still important. Honest and unbiased collection and reporting of data is still essential. Extensive patient education is still necessary. Excellent physicians are conservative in wanting to protect and preserve these fundamental principles of science, medicine, and ethics.

But excellent physicians are also radical, in the most accurate sense of the word. The word "radical" is derived from the Latin word for "root" (radix)---"of or relating to the root." Excellent physicians seek the root cause of problems. They do not just focus on symptoms or epiphenomena. They carefully distinguish between superficial epiphenomena and underlying root cause phenomena.

Excellent physicians are revolutionary. They are open to major, revolutionary "paradigm shifts," when new compelling evidence strongly suggests that scientific understanding and clinical care

will improve if such shifts are made.

In order to best serve patients and advance understanding, excellent physicians are appropriately liberal in that they are open to new ideas, open to new ways of thinking (within reason), and want to consider an array of hypotheses. At the same time, excellent physicians avoid being excessively liberal. They are appropriately skeptical and wary of an “anything goes” approach.

Excellent physicians are progressive. Their goal is to continually advance scientific understanding and continually improve clinical care. They realize that in order to make progress, it is necessary to seek root cause, be open to new ideas, be willing to explore a variety of plausible hypotheses, be willing to make revolutionary changes, and be appropriately liberal, appropriately conservative, appropriately tolerant, and appropriately intolerant. What is “appropriate” is determined through careful, respectful dialogue and analysis of honestly collected and honestly presented data.

Excellent physicians are appropriately tolerant and appropriately intolerant. They not only tolerate dissenting views but also encourage dissenting views. They promote critical thinking and vigorous, respectful dialogue. **They do not censor.** At the same time, they will not tolerate malpractice, malfeasance, fraud, and reckless practice of Medicine.

So, as you can see, excellent physicians are conservative, liberal, radical, revolutionary, progressive, appropriately tolerant, and appropriately intolerant—all at once.

What excellent physicians are NOT is reactionary. “Reactionary” implies a strong, knee-jerk, close-minded resistance to change. Reactionary behavior impedes positive progress. Excellent physicians are not close-minded or inappropriately intolerant. They are not overzealous in protecting their point of view. They don’t censor. They don’t shame or humiliate those who disagree with them.

Because of the above characteristics, excellent physicians, as a group, do not become harmfully polarized and divided. Instead, they seek to be united in a shared quest to better understand scientific truths and improve clinical care—to make scientific and clinical progress. By encouraging critical thinking, different thinking, and vigorous, respectful dialogue, they avoid “group think,” stagnation, misguided consensus, inappropriate tolerance, inappropriate intolerance, and overzealousness.

Perhaps society as a whole would benefit from emulating the way excellent physicians think and

behave. Instead of narrowly labeling ourselves and others as either “conservative” or “liberal,” perhaps all of us should strive to be appropriately conservative, liberal, radical, revolutionary, and progressive all at once. Perhaps we can strive to be appropriately tolerant and appropriately intolerant, as opposed to inappropriately tolerant and inappropriately intolerant—while being committed to critical thinking and healthy, wholesome dialogue as to what is “appropriate” or “inappropriate.” Perhaps we can strive to avoid being reactionary and overzealous in protecting our preferences and points of view. Perhaps this would help to reverse the terribly unhealthy polarization and hateful division that characterizes current culture and is preventing the healthy dialogue that is needed for successful problem solving and wholesome social progress.

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