

Dr Alton Ochsner's Ethics

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The principle by which a man lives usually determines his character. My father was a complex man with profound integrity. People who did not know him well could easily misinterpret his beliefs and/or his moral qualities. The complexity of his character was defined by his extreme work habit, which allowed him knowledge of many subjects and philosophies.

He was often dogmatic on a subject but would change his opinion if situations or notable persuasion convinced him differently. I viewed him as a human chameleon. My father thought of himself as a raging bull, and cancer was a red flag. His approach to all cancer was to radically excise the tumor and surrounding area. For years, he championed a radical pneumonectomy as the treatment for any cancer of the lung. Some years later, Dr Richard Overholt of Boston claimed that one needed only to remove the lobe in which the tumor resided. Dad was happy to perform a study in which both methods were used, and when the results showed there were no differences in the outcome, he immediately stated that he was wrong in his rigid view.

My father was very conservative, yet often his actions were pioneeringly liberal. He and his partners founded the first major group practice in the South despite reluctance from the local medical community. The local medical doctors tried to block their progress with a vengeance. Each of the 5 founders, on Holy Thursday night, April 13, 1941, received a leather pouch containing 30 silver dimes with a note that read, "To help you pay for your clinic. From the physicians, surgeons and dentists of New Orleans"—the implication being that the founders were Judases. Another example of his liberality is that when the Ochsner

Foundation Hospital opened, it was entirely racially integrated. My dad was adamant that "God did not intend for the infirmed to be treated differently by race." It was the first hospital in the South to be completely integrated.

Dad wrote his creed which contained 6 beliefs. In the creed were "Be honest with others and with yourself" and "Be loyal." Loyalty is one of the finest attributes, and it is found so infrequently. Both can be viewed as ethical ideology.

In my childhood, if there was a question as to whether I did something improper, I soon learned to be truthful despite the wrong because deceiving always led to my father's wrath. I can assure you that was not a pleasant experience.

My dad believed in egalitarian principles. He felt it was an honor to be a physician, and one should not play god nor charge inappropriate fees. He was always disappointed when a doctor took advantage of his professional status to make money. He believed that all clinic physicians should contribute financially to this clinic to allow continued improvements. Dr DeBakey once told me that my father could have been extremely wealthy, but he never charged an unsuitable fee. Dr DeBakey said presidents of countries and wealthy people would come from Europe and Central and South America aboard private planes for an office visit. Dad's fee would be \$5.00. He did not waiver from this principle.

He never had monetary wealth but never complained. He died with only minor financial assets; nevertheless, he lived a righteous and happy life.