

## Responsibility

All of us are frequently made aware of the “talents” that many in positions of leadership possess: they exploit credit for achievements, but they dodge and shirk responsibility for any mistakes that are theirs either by commission or omission.

In its endeavor to garner the latest “news,” the media continually cite an “unnamed source,” “an anonymous individual” or more commonly, “the spokesman who agreed to be quoted only if he (or she) remained unidentified.” These shenanigans were all too prominent in the recent Iran/Contra hearings, the BCCI banking scandal, the Anita Hill Senate review, and the “Tail-Hook” Society investigations. This practice by the Fourth Estate borders on deceit and perpetuates the problems of irresponsibility. The increasing efforts to avoid responsibility for one’s words or actions have torn the warp and woof of our nation’s moral fabric and have seriously eroded the value of that fabric in our national and international dealings.

In the lecture halls of our universities, at our professional society meetings, or in our continuing education programs, we must be ever mindful of and guarded about the validity of speakers’ statements, claims, and values. As professionals, we are responsible for the accuracy, honesty, and scientific validity of our material. The same is true for our writings, publications, and press/TV releases and interviews. Inaccurate, unproven, or questionable presentations are often accepted on the basis of the author’s reputation and the legitimacy of the forum. If the author has uncertainties and doubts concerning a segment of the material, a suitable caveat for the audience is warranted. Too often, errors are perpetuated and repeated by others who have accepted the first hearing or reading. In time, the questionable material takes on a life of its own and rises to the level of fact. The original presenter denies any responsibility for the myth that is generated. It may well be that this denial is warranted, since the final product bears little resemblance to the presenter’s first utterances. The medical and dental literature is replete with these half-truths, many of which have required years of research and study to disprove or “straighten out.”

Science advances by hypothesis and, in some instances, by half-truths. Our current knowledge is, and rightfully should be, in a state of flux. We take note of our assumptions and make adjustments, corrections, and improvements as we seek the final truth. Our

“facts” should never be constant; they should show progressive change.

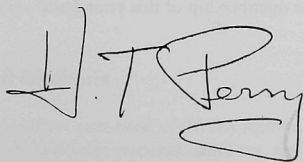
Professional responsibility requires full testing of a concept and we must not be immutably wedded to an idea if it is questionable. We must adjust it for strength or abandon it. We should not defend faulty thought against all new evidence and knowledge.

In our private practices we are responsible for the actions of our associates and employees. This is a formidable challenge and it disproportionately increases with the number of our employees and the level of state and federal regulations. We cannot legally deny our responsibility for any actions of our employees in an ethical peer review setting or court hearing. Nonetheless, we are tempted to use the dodge that our political leadership, from the President down to our local government officials, use to deny their obligations. However, morally and ethically, we cannot.

It seems that it is high time for our elected and appointed officials to assume the full measure of duty that we expect of them and to follow those tried and true words from the little desktop sign of President Harry Truman: “The Buck Stops Here.” If those in positions of leadership in our government and professional societies on the national, state, and local level would recognize their personal obligation to accept responsibility for either success or failure, our national and professional moral fiber would be strengthened. Each of us, from the individual practitioner and citizen, to our highest professional or governmental officials, must assume a mantle of liability for all of our commerce, exchange, and service. When we shirk that responsibility, we easily tear asunder the moral and ethical fabric of our society.

*Success has many fathers, but failure is an orphan.*

— Winston Churchill, 1943



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