



# Five foundations for professional life

## key points

We need to pay careful attention to five basic foundations of our professional lives if we hope to have a spiritual impact.

If we want people to pay attention to our faith, we must first be **competent**. But it's not enough to practise good medicine. There must also be something attractive about our **characters**.

Our capacity to show **compassion** to others probably reflects how deeply we ourselves have received the grace of God; while wise **communication** including the ability to listen well may have an enormous influence on a patient's life.

Finally, when it comes to living and speaking for Christ, it takes **courage** to get started and keep going.

**H**ow might we recognise spiritual issues in the life of a patient or colleague at work? Would we be competent to help? Might we misuse our powerful position as doctors? Would colleagues consider us out of line? Do politically correct masters exercise control over the way we work? Do we have enough time even to fulfil our basic contractual obligations? These are some of the questions that come to our minds as we wrestle with what it means to be a *Christian* doctor.

Since I started working with CMF last year, I have had conversations with hundreds of Christian doctors in this country and abroad. Many have expressed frustration that they are being squeezed into a 'neutral' mould. Many struggle to see where being a Christian can make a difference in their daily professional lives.

I would suggest that we need to pay careful attention to five basic foundations of our professional lives if we hope to have a spiritual impact.

### Competence

If we want people to pay attention to our faith, we must first pay attention to our work. If your own child is seriously ill, you will want the *best* doctor you can find!

Excellence is an important value in the kingdom of God and Paul encourages all of us to pursue it. 'Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.'<sup>1</sup>

C Everett Koop, a former Surgeon-General in the USA, advises Christians, 'Almost everything we say is politically incorrect, so make sure you practise good medicine before you open your mouth!'

If, as Christians, we aspire to professional competence, students will need to take their studies seriously and continuing medical education will be welcomed by all of us!

### Character

It's not enough to practise good medicine. There must be something attractive about us personally. 'If you don't like the doctor, nothing's going to work,' an elderly patient, with an intractable skin rash, once said to me.

'What would Jesus do?' is a popular question to ask nowadays. However the character of Christ needs to be built into us and find routine expression in the way we behave, as we don't have time to pause and reflect before our every action! How does this happen? We read that 'the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law'.<sup>2</sup> Many of us may find that God begins to forge these characteristics in us as we learn to face our failures and disappointments. Are we allowing him to do that?

*Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become pure, children of God without fault in a crooked and depraved generation, in which you shine like stars in the universe as you hold out the word of life.*<sup>3</sup>



God is ready to forgive each of us through Christ.

### Communication

'The doctor didn't really listen to me.' Sadly this has probably been said about all of us, whether we are aware of it or not. We never reach the end of needing to improve our listening skills, and time and time again we may need a prompt from the Lord to *slow down*. On one occasion as a patient was leaving the room, clearly dissatisfied, a GP I know had the humility to stand up, move to the door, apologise to the patient that the consultation had gone so badly and invite her to sit down and let him try again! Second time round, they did much better.

What we say may get us into even more trouble. If only we'd had the wisdom to ask one more question before wading in, things might have gone much better! Jesus is our model in asking the question that really gets to the vital issue and we know that wise communication from the doctor may have an enormous influence on a patient's life. A word in season may help a patient make a key step in turning their life around.

*Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.*<sup>6</sup>

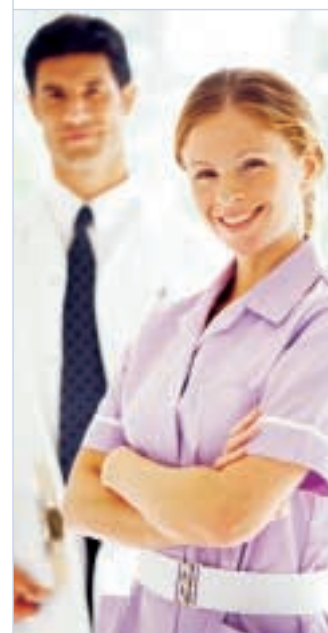
### Courage

What is the biggest temptation for the Christian doctor? Is it money? Is it sex? Is it power? While all these are serious temptations that have tripped up a significant number of doctors, I suggest that the greatest temptation we Christian doctors face is simply to give up, to play safe, to keep our heads below the parapet and look after our own comfort. In our heads we have plenty of excuses to justify this. However let us hear Paul's exhortation, 'Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing.'<sup>7</sup> Let's pray for opportunities to speak for Christ with our colleagues and our patients and ask him for courage to take those opportunities when they come. I am reminded of Jesus words, 'Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my father in heaven. But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my father in heaven.'<sup>8</sup>

It's not enough just to live a good life; people also need a verbal explanation of the relationship with God that inspires our behaviour. When it comes to living and speaking for Christ, it takes courage to get started and it takes more courage to keep going. May the Lord give to each one of us a new heart to love and serve him in our work every day.

*But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.*<sup>9</sup>

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### Compassion

A surgical colleague of mine found that his attitude to young road accident victims on ventilators in intensive care changed when he himself narrowly escaped with his life after making a mistake when driving. Our capacity to show compassion to others probably reflects how deeply we ourselves have received the grace of God. 'Praise be to the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.'<sup>4</sup> It is likely that we will meet patients and colleagues who have made foolish or even immoral decisions and if we deceive ourselves into thinking that we are safe on the moral high ground, we will probably be unable to help them.

I well remember a day when a woman who had become pregnant by a casual sexual relationship and had an abortion two years previously, consulted me for help with her feelings of guilt, her inability to concentrate on her work and her insomnia. It had taken her two years to summon enough courage to see the doctor and she was desperate and extremely agitated. Had I spoken to her from my 'high horse' I might never have got through to her, but when I pointed out that my need for forgiveness was just as great as hers (and we know that Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount that anger has the same root of sin as murder and looking at a woman lustfully is the same as committing adultery<sup>5</sup>), she relaxed and we had an opportunity to pray together and to share how

### references

1. Colossians 3:23-24
2. Galatians 5:22-23
3. Philippians 2:14-16
4. 2 Corinthians 1:3-4
5. Matthew 6:22&26
6. Colossians 4:5-6
7. 1 Thessalonians 5:11
8. Matthew 10:32