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Views & Reviews**Medical Classics****Aphorisms and Facetiae of Bela Schick***BMJ 2008; 337 doi: 10.1136/bmj.a1358 (Published 27 August 2008)*

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“Meetings are for meeting people—the scientific sessions are of secondary importance,” declared the professor to his retinue, commenting on an issue rekindled in recent years by the advent of video conferencing. On another occasion he wistfully reflected: “After 20 years one is no longer quoted in the medical literature. Every 20 years one sees a republication of the same ideas.”

The professor, Bela Schick, was born in Hungary, studied in Austria, and from 1923 to 1942 was director of paediatrics at Mount Sinai Hospital in New York. At his retirement he suggested that every chief should have a dog and leave it on the floor of the department where he had served; for like Ulysses returning to Ithaca after his long absence he will find that only his dog will recognise him. But in scientific circles Dr Schick is remembered for devising the test used to determine susceptibility to diphtheria. The Schick test (1911) consisted of injecting intradermally a small amount of toxin; redness and swelling of the skin around the injection site indicated

a positive result.

Like many university professors of his time he had a tendency to develop an oracular style and cast precious pearls before his impressionable younger associates. He had, moreover, a compulsive younger associate who early in life had developed the habit of committing his various chiefs' utterances to paper. At Mount Sinai Hospital I J Wolf wrote down Dr Schick's sayings and later published them in a little 50 page book. Many of the sayings are memorable and still relevant. Be humble, be kind to your patients, and be sceptical, for your patients have the right to more than mere science. One of his favorite expressions was "tincture of time," for time was the physician's best remedy in treating or clarifying a difficult case. On ward rounds, when an x ray picture was nowhere to be found, he would say that "someone must have it in his private collection." Once he said that you could always make a theory but must keep open a window so as to throw it out if necessary. "Statistics could prove anything, even the truth." And "it takes 10 years for a good idea to become established—10 years for a wrong observation to be forgotten."

He did not like seeing babies placed in rows in the nursery "like bread on a baker's shelves," for "to expose a newborn to infection is criminal." On the subject of retirement from medical practice he suggested that it was very difficult to slow down, for the practice of medicine was like the heart's contraction, all or none. Commenting on a case where an inordinate number of tests had been ordered, he remarked, "He did not know a case could have so many possibilities of investigation." And when a subaltern was droning on and presenting a case in a monotonous and inaudible voice he turned around and said, "Please—louder and funnier."

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Footnotes

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