

Dr. Skorton, C.P. Snow and "The Two Cultures"

Dr. David Skorton hardly defines himself by what many would consider his primary occupation: president of Cornell University. During lectures and speeches, he'll talk at length about his professorship in internal medicine and pediatrics, his board certification in cardiology, even his failed attempts at becoming a jazz musician or a stint selling women's shoes while an undergrad at Northwestern University — until it becomes clear that all that Dr. Skorton has done up to this point is just as critical to him as the influential post he now holds.

Dr. Skorton's career path, like many faculty members and administrators at Weill Cornell Medical College, has bridged several different academic and cultural disciplines.

Taking the view of one deeply engaged in not only life sciences, but social sciences and the humanities as well, Dr. Skorton was at Weill Cornell on Thursday, March 19, to discuss science, ethics and society as they pertain to C.P. Snow's landmark lecture "The Two Cultures."

In 1959, Snow, a British scientist and novelist, delivered his lecture, which posited that a lack of communication between the cultures of the sciences and the humanities presented an obstacle in solving many of the world's problems.

To celebrate the 50th anniversary of Snow's lecture, which later became a book, Weill Cornell's Division of Medical Ethics in the Departments of Public Health and Medicine has over the past few months invited a number of speakers from varied academic and professional backgrounds to discuss Snow's thesis and how it has evolved in the half century.

"All of our guests have spanned all kinds of disciplines and traditional boundaries of knowledge and scholarship," said Dr. Joseph Fins, chief of the Division of Medical Ethics at Weill Cornell Medical College. "To celebrate the 50th anniversary of this seminal publication and its relevance to bioethics and its particular disciplines, we will consider the relevance of the two-culture divide to medicine, the history of science, philosophy, theology, the media, public policy and the law."

Other scholars and writers, including Snow himself, indicated that the passage of time had done much to, if not eradicate the gulf between the two cultures, at least draw them closer together.

"C.P. Snow's book was one that I and many of you read a long time past," Dr. Skorton said. "Much has changed in the last 50 years since he analyzed society and found science and humanities utterly separate and almost incapable of communicating with each other. Today, were he with us, he might have to acknowledge that there are three cultures — the sciences on one hand, humanities cast on the other side, and the social sciences somewhere else."

The world outside of science and the humanities has also changed drastically since Snow's day.

"Another issue that is a countervailing force against Snow's construct is the fact that the so called general public, of which I consider myself a card-carrying member, is potentially much more informed about a very broad variety of issues," Dr. Skorton said. "For example, my background

Dean's Bulletin
April 6, 2009

is as a failed musician, but I am beginning to understand a lot more about the world of finance and accounting and sales of taxable debt than I ever thought I would."

Whether Snow's two cultures have indeed reconciled to each other to some degree, or the advent of a third "social sciences" culture has created the illusion of a narrowing division, Dr. Skorton stressed that in today's world, where the science of stem cell research must confront the ethics and morality of an American public that is hardly in accord on the issue, the need for bridges connecting these cultures has never been greater.

"We must find our way through the lack of consensus with regards to both medical ethics and our own professional code of ethics," he said.

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Bringing Business Sense to the Global Health Burden

Rajat Gupta never saw himself helping the poorest people in the world battle diseases largely forgotten in the developed world. As the former worldwide managing director of the consulting firm McKinsey and Co., Gupta spent his time solving business problems for the world's most successful companies.

"I have a completely accidental involvement in global health," he says. "This was not the design of my career."

Asked personally by U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan in 2002 to chair of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, Gupta, who is also a member of the Weill Cornell Medical College Board of Overseers, is now involved at the ground level in the battle to reduce the global disease burden.

On March 20, Gupta spoke in Uris Auditorium about the Global Fund's mission, as well as how strategies borrowed from the business world are helping to fund the worldwide health fight in a down economy.

"This is an era punctuated by billion-dollar bailouts and pyramid schemes gone horribly wrong. The global health community is not immune," said Sandeep Kishore, a fourth-year MD-PhD student at Weill Cornell who leads the student organization Universities Allied for Essential Medicines at Weill Cornell, which sponsored the event. "Every dollar that is spent is being heavily scrutinized and nobody knows this better than Mr. Gupta," he said.

"The global health community is very much at an inflection point right now," Gupta said. "There have been dramatic successes, but the majority of countries are not meeting [U.N.] goals to improve child survival and maternal health."

The Global Fund's innovation is that it is strictly a financing vehicle, Gupta said. It does not develop new global health programs, nor does it implement them; instead, the Global Fund operates much as an investment group does: it accepts proposals from local organizations, decides whether to finance them, and regularly reviews the performance of funded programs.

Just seven years after its launch, the Global Fund is now the main source of finance for programs to fight AIDS, tuberculosis and malaria in the world, providing more than \$11.4 billion to programs in 136 countries.

Accountability and economy — two principles borrowed from business — are central to this approach, Gupta said.

"Performance-based funding is at the heart of our operating model," Gupta said. The organization requires recipients to hit specific targets throughout the grant, Gupta said, and in cases where expectations have not been met, the organization has pulled funding.

Dean's Bulletin
April 6, 2009

"We need to operate in a very different mode, going after all the efficiencies that we can and being extremely conscious of every dollar spent," Gupta said.

Academic institutions like Weill Cornell can contribute by providing a "neutral voice" in the global health debate, he said.

Dean Antonio M. Gotto, who welcomed Gupta at the start of the discussion, also spoke at length of Weill Cornell's international initiatives. In addition to collaborative programs in Haiti, Tanzania and elsewhere, fully half the student body participates in international programs. "We are truly committed to global health," Dr. Gotto said.

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Focusing on Colon Cancer at the Monahan Center

Five nights a week, millions watch Katie Couric deliver the day's top stories on the "CBS Evening News." On Thursday, March 26, Couric followed her broadcast with another public address. Although on a much smaller scale, this appearance was just as important to her.

Couric spoke that night as part of a free seminar on colon cancer screening and prevention organized by The Jay Monahan Center for Gastrointestinal Health at New York-Presbyterian Hospital/Weill Cornell Medical Center. Monahan, a well-known New York City defense attorney, passed away in 1998, about two years after he was first diagnosed with late-stage colon cancer. He and Couric were married in 1989 and had two children together.

Since her husband's death, Couric has become a very public and effective advocate for colon cancer screening, even undergoing a colonoscopy on television when she was a co-host on NBC's "The Today Show."

"I was put in a position where I had a very public job and a very personal tragedy," Couric said while answering questions from the audience at the Monahan Center.

Dr. Mark Pochapin, director of the Monahan Center and Monahan's physician during his illness, lauded Couric's efforts to raise awareness for colorectal cancer. The disease is the second-leading cause of cancer-related deaths in the United States, he noted, but also one of the most preventable and curable cancers as well.

Dr. Pochapin was joined at the seminar by Dr. Felice Schnoll-Sussman, director of research at the Monahan Center.

Colon cancer occurs in both men and women, and while anyone with a colon is at risk, people aged 50 or older are much more likely to develop the disease than younger adults. Family history of either colon cancer or polyps are also strong risk factors, as are lifestyle considerations, such as a diet high in red and processed meats.

Screening and removal of colon polyps is the key to preventing colorectal cancer, Dr. Pochapin said.

"No polyps equals no cancer," he said.

While the colonoscopy remains the industry standard, Dr. Pochapin said there are several new tests that can also be used to screen for polyps. One, a CT colonoscopy, captures a virtual image of the colon. However, with this virtual screening, the colon still must be empty prior to the test and inflated with air during it — two aspects that can make a standard colonoscopy somewhat uncomfortable.

Dr. Schnoll-Sussman discussed the latest research behind both the causes of colon cancer and potential genetic indicators that may lead to even better screening options.

Dean's Bulletin
April 6, 2009

Diet and exercise are both important factors to consider in colon cancer prevention, Dr. Schnoll-Sussman said. While research has resulted in conflicting reports on whether vitamin D or a high-fiber diet may prevent colon cancer, she noted that neither would hurt.

There is no debate, however, about obesity.

"Obesity is absolutely linked to polyp production and colon cancer," Dr. Schnoll-Sussman said, stressing that even a moderate amount of exercise can facilitate colon health.

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Tri-Institutional Students Claim Prestigious UNCF/Merck Fellowships

Three students in the Tri-Institutional MD-PhD Program have been awarded the extremely competitive United Negro College Fund/Merck Science Research Dissertation Fellowship.

Dennis Spencer, Fatima Soliman and Tanya Williams learned recently they each received one of only 12 national fellowship slots.

The Fellows will each receive a grant of \$52,000, which may be used to cover a portion of their stipend, as well as to purchase equipment and supplies, and to cover the travel costs to attend scientific meetings.

Also, each Fellow will attend Fellows Day, June 27 through July 1, at the Normandy Farm Hotel and Conference Center in Blue Bell, Penn. During Fellows Day, they will have the opportunity to meet other Fellows and their Merck mentors and to visit the Merck Research Laboratories.

Spencer, who works in Dr. Vincent Fischetti's lab at The Rockefeller University's Laboratory of Bacterial Pathogenesis, is currently studying streptococcal (strep throat) interactions that could lead to vaccine development.

Soliman works under the direction of Dr. B.J. Casey, director of the Sackler Institute for Developmental Psychobiology at Weill Cornell Medical College, testing the effects of a common polymorphism in the brain integral to a number of clinical disorders, such as anxiety and depression.

Williams is in the Division of Neurobiology of the Department of Neurology and Neuroscience at Weill Cornell, under Director Dr. Teresa Milner. She is studying gender differences in the link between stress exerted on the hippocampus and drug-seeking behavior.

All three of the Fellows are graduates of the MD-PhD Program's Gateways to the Laboratory Program. The Gateways summer program was established in 1993 by the Tri-Institutional Program as a way to prepare college freshmen and sophomores for the MD-PhD application process and the rigors of a career as a physician-scientist. Students spend 10 weeks over the summer working in labs, giving oral and poster presentations, and participating in several career enhancing workshops.

"We are thrilled at the remarkable achievements of these three MD-PhD students," said Ruth Gotian, administrative director of the Tri-Institutional MD-PhD Program. "We are especially honored to have worked with them since they started their journey of becoming a physician-scientist in our Gateways to the Laboratory Program. We are honored and humbled by their latest achievements and are confident that we will continue to see great successes from them."

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Awards & Honors

Dr. David Nanus, the Mark W. Pasmantier Professor of Hematology and Oncology in Medicine, professor of medicine and professor of urology, has been awarded the Dan Fogelberg Creativity Award, an honor bestowed by the Prostate Cancer Foundation. One of only 10 such prizes given by the Foundation, the award supports innovative ideas that are not currently funded by any existing government or private sources but have the potential to achieve breakthroughs for the detection and treatment of prostate cancer. Dr. Nanus' project combines, for the first time, an advanced system to capture circulating prostate cancer cells from whole blood with the discovery of a biomarker that may predict sensitivity to Taxotere, as well as other anti-prostate medicines. While clinical investigations have already shown that Taxotere prolongs survival for advanced prostate cancer patients, this new technology could predict which individuals are most likely to respond to this therapy while sparing many from unnecessary side effects.

Dr. Jason Spector, assistant professor of surgery, has been named an Academic Scholar of the American Association of Plastic Surgeons. The honor was announced during the association's annual meeting, held this year in Rancho Mirage, Calif., on March 21–24. The two-year faculty research scholarship is awarded to surgeons to assist them in the establishment of a new and independent research program. Dr. Spector's areas of research include bioregenerative medicine and surgery, tissue engineering, gene therapy and wound healing, among others. He is the principal investigator and founder of the Laboratory for Bioregenerative Medicine & Surgery, the research arm of the Division of Plastic & Reconstructive Surgery at Weill Cornell Medical College.

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