CHIRON AND HIS CENTAUR CHRONOLOGY

An Address to The 2006 Biennial Symposium

"Disasters Do Happen — Are you Ready?"

of the
Centaur Memorial Fund for Nurses
with
The Queensland University of Technology
and
The Queensland Department of Health

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The history of the healing professions, in the western tradition, began with Apollo's gift of healing to Chiron, the good centaur, in Arcadia in ancient Greece. Centaurs of that era had rather a mixed reputation. There were rare "good" centaurs, but most had their joyous, usually drunken and mischievous ways with nymphs and maenads whom they caught in the forest. Chiron was an exception.

Chiron in turn taught the healing arts to Asclepius, the god of medicine, known from Homeric (1100 B.C.E.) writings of the Iliad. Therein, Asclepius is referred to as "the blameless physician". In turn, Asclepius taught the healing crafts to Hygieia, the goddess of health; and to Machaon and Podalirius, to Panacea, and to Telesphorus, the god of convalescence and rehabilitation — his children. Extended families of hereditary healers developed from that time. There were referred to as the Aesculapidiae who practised in ancient Greece until the time of Hippocrates (460 – 377 B.C.E.). Hippocrates, the historical figure and foremost physician who emerged from the shadows of pre-literate Greece, is the "Father" of the modern art and science of medicine and the other health professions as we know these today.

The centaur, Chiron, became the surrogate father of Achilles and is recorded also as the educator of Jason. Since the times of classical Greece, he is regarded as the prime source of wisdom in natural medicine. Today, the symbol of Chiron the centaur is often found in medical, health and veterinary iconography; and in turn has given his name to many symbolic forms of care and healing. One such example is the scientific name of the plant genus Centaurea, of which the beautiful blue cornflower, Centaurea caerulea is the best known, growing with Flander's Poppies and flowering in November at the time of Remembrance Day. Another such example was the Australian hospital ship, Centaur, and the Centaur Memorial Fund for Nurses today.
HMAHS Centaur was built in the great Greenock Shipyards, in Scotland in 1924. Of 3,222 gross tonnage, she was built as a cargo ship primarily to carry livestock. There was accommodation for 450 head of cattle; and cabins for 72 crew and passengers. Between her bulkheads were built 13,000 cubic metres of storage space for grain and bailed fodder. After the outbreak of the Second World War, she was commissioned as an Australian Hospital Ship; and it was as HMAHS Centaur that she has passed into history.

The Centaur was the short-lived home for 332 people (320 men and 12 nursing sisters), three-quarters of whom were to perish on that fateful day of 14th May, 1943 when she was sunk off the east coast of Moreton Island in southern Queensland waters.

HMAHS Centaur was crewed by Merchant Navy seamen. They ranged from a 15 year old adolescent boy (Ordinary Seaman Bob Westwood) to the 67 year old, and splendidly named, Captain Salt. Captain Salt had assumed command as her pilot for what was to be her last voyage from Sydney (leaving on the 10th May 1943), destined ultimately for Port Moresby. Her formal complement were the ship’s crew (the Merchant Navy); the medical and nursing complement of her as a military Hospital Ship; and the fully Embarked Unit of the 2/12 Australian Field Ambulance.

Centaur was torpedoed just after 4a.m. on 14th May 1943 and sank within three minutes. Sister Eleanor Savage was the sole survivor of the Australian nurses. Of the total complement of 332, 268 perished. Only 14 members of the 2/12 Australian Field Ambulance, of the 200 who had embarked, survived the ensuing minutes. A graphic first-hand account of one of those survivors, Mr George McGrath, recorded the heroism and the resilience of those who managed to survive on several floats, until rescued some 35 hours later by the United States destroyer, USS Mugford. George McGrath described how 22 survivors supported each other on an overloaded
float and a hatch-cover which the soldiers attached to the float by rope as a
tow;

"...after swimming for sometime, I heard voices and was able to make
out the outline of a float which I swam for and scrambled on board
along with a number of other survivors. We eventually totalled 22
which in the open sea required a sense of balance from all to keep the
float on an even keel...as the sun came up and the day wore on...a
hatch-way cover with a rope hawser attached to the central lifting ring
was taken in tow and used to lessen the stress on the overloaded float.
With four of the fittest taking turns on the hatch-way cover, sitting
back-to-back....I was naked with the exception of my wristwatch
having lost my briefs in the exist from the ship....I did rescue a Red
Cross Pennant which afforded me some little protection. The day wore
on and there were no signs of rescue. Limited rations kept in
watertight containers were issued and we prepared for the night to
come which in my mind was to be the most stressful in my war career.
We all realised that death, a violent one, was possible (sharks) but did
not stop praying or giving up hope. Dawn eventually came which was
a great relief. The bloody sharks were ever present and even attacked
an empty flare tin which fell into the water. My eyes were affected by
the oil and saltwater....I had to constantly rub them but I ended up
keeping them shut most of the time for relief...It was after a period of
time in the evening, after the longest day, that the Destroyer [USS
Mugford] glided alongside our raft, with sailors lowering rope
ladders...the sailors gave us plenty of support hauling us aboard. I
recall one chap who had been burnt screaming and then fainting when
the skin came off his arms. The sharks were still with us and I
remember a sailor (from the USS Mugford) emptying a magazine into
the pack. There was a tremendous flurry in the water with the sharks
tearing each other apart...".
Only 14 surviving members of the 2/12 Australian Field Ambulance survived.

**Disasters and Human Behaviour**

The theme of the 2006 Centaur Biennial Symposium was “Disasters do Happen! Are you ready?” Over the last two decades, Australia has become increasingly aware of the inevitability of disasters — a strategic planning which dates from the aftermath of the Brisbane Floods (1974), the Cyclone Tracy destruction of Darwin (Christmas Day, 1975), and subsequent disasters which have afflicted our near-neighbours in the south-west Pacific.

Disasters are both the result of natural catastrophe and of the sub-human behaviour of humankind itself. One sees in disasters, whatever their cause, both the best and the worst of individuals. For me, there are two particular lessons from disasters. The first of these relates to the fact that there is only a very thin veneer of civilisation imposed on the cultural evolution of humankind. The second is that individuals rise to almost super-human heights when resolve and resilience and sustained courage are needed in the aftermath of such catastrophes.

The sinking of HMAHS *Centaur* is one example of the basest side of human behaviour. The Japanese submarine (I-177) which torpedoed the *Centaur* off Moreton Island in south-east Queensland on 14th May, 1943, acted in gross contravention to the Geneva Conventions. The civilised world naturally expressed universal revulsion and condemnation of this atrocity.

In fact, that and the other atrocities perpetrated by the Japanese in the Second World War, had not been typical of that nation in former times. In Japan, after the Meiji restoration in 1867, Japan herself had been a founding member of the International Red Cross. In the first decades after the foundation of the International Red Cross (1864), Japan had easily the largest Red Cross Society in the world. The Japanese Patron was the
Japanese Empress herself. Japanese treatment of prisoners-of-war during the Russo-Japanese War of 1904 was exemplary. It was the change in political behaviour and national persona of the 1930s, followed by the rise of Japanese fascists who instituted the change which led to the rejection of the concepts of civilised international law, embodied in such things as the Geneva Conventions. The point here is that seen in longitudinal perspective, and now from the audit of 60 years after the cessation of hostilities, one sees that base era as an aberration.

The same was experienced in the Rwandan genocide of April and May 1994. In that unthinkable atrocity, some 800,000 Rwandese (perhaps half of whom were women and children) were slaughtered, the majority killed by axes and machetes. The Rwandese Medical School, at its base in the capital, Kigali, had a sophisticated postgraduate programme with some 19 specialty university and medical departments in that Hospital. In the University Department of Medicine, the Professor of Medicine also killed several of his staff members. They were Tutsis, Senior Lecturers in his own Department. Thus one can see that the veneer of civilisation is indeed thin. Again, however, if one takes a longitudinal view point of centuries rather than decades, one sees a different side to the proud Hutu People. They had a proud heritage, spanning at least 600 years, as proud tillers of the soil; and had lived if not in total harmony, at least in relative peace with the Tutsis, these latter dating back their pharanoic origins to the Nile delta some 2000 years ago. Seen in this perspective, the Rwandan genocide again was an aberration in the history of the Hutu People.

The good centaur, Chiron, who by a rather convoluted chronology, gave his name to the hospital ship, Centaur, and to the muscular Centaur Memorial Fund for Nurses today, was also in one sense a aberration. He was a minor god who stood out from the stereotypic deplorable behaviour of those of his kind. In the context of disaster planning, the message of the Centaur is that it is worthwhile continuously striving for a better world.
The Centaur Memorial Fund for Nurses was established in 1948, when an appalled world wished to commemorate the lives that had been lost on the hospital ship, *Centaur*. The sum of 80,000 Australian pounds was raised, an enormous sum in those days, with an equivalent buying power today of almost a billion dollars. Today, the Centaur Memorial Fund for Nurses provides generous stipends ($15,000) to support nursing research; and in its silver medals, bestowed to the top undergraduate student of nursing graduating for the Bachelor of Nursing degree at five of Queensland’s universities, one sees also the symbolism and witness of all that is best in humankind.

Although the clock can never be turned back and lost lives can never be resurrected following disasters, the courage and self-sacrifice of those who rose above the destruction and carnage, remains an inspiration for all who indeed strive for a better world.