“Consider the past and you shall know the future.” --Chinese proverb

In his Presidential Address, “There is life outside the operating room,” Dr. Charles R. Hatcher Jr. reminded us that there is life outside the operating room (Ann Thor Surg 1988;45:117-121). He told us, “I would like to discuss certain of the challenges we face with you.” He warned that “a reduction in surgical fees for coronary bypass surgery is imminent.” This was occurring in the face of older and sicker patients, with operations being more difficult and more time-consuming, plus the need to achieve more complete revascularization. He went on to say that a “standard all-inclusive surgical fee should be reinstated before any across-the-board cuts are applied.”

Dr. Hatcher described some industry-wide changes in the practice of medicine, including “administrative alienation of nurses and physicians” and the rise of the hospital administrators. He thought that physician’s assistants “should not be accepted as a final substitute for a close working relationship between doctors and nurses.” He added that “there is no substitute for physician authority over the operation of a hospital.” Finally, he stated that “Congress must remain convinced that it is in society’s best interest to support the nonprofit hospital system by appropriate tax exemption.”

He remarked upon the tensions that may develop in an academic department of surgery, and he bemoaned the “isolation and hyperspecialization” that frequently occur. He said that “it is most appropriate for us to support general surgery.”

Dr. Hatcher then said that percutaneous transluminal coronary angioplasty “has revolutionized the practice of cardiology” and that angioplasties would “number some 500,000 per annum.” He mentioned that there have been few prospective randomized controlled trials and that we should “hold our cardiology colleagues to management programs based on hard data.”

Next, he recounted the changes that occurred on his watch as Chief of the Section of Cardiothoracic Surgery at the Emory Clinic since 1971, Director and CEO of The Emory Clinic in 1975, and Vice-President for Health Affairs and Director of the Robert W. Woodruff Health Sciences Center in 1984.

Thus, “there is much for a cardiothoracic surgeon to do outside the operating room.” Dr. Hatcher went on to say, “I know of no greater pool of talent than mature cardiothoracic surgeons.” He told us that “you must become involved” and “our profession will be much the better for your commitment.”