“Caritas Chirurgi” was the title of the Presidential Address delivered by F. Henry Ellis Jr. (Ann Thorac Surg 1978;26:6-10). The title means The Surgeon’s “Caritas,” a term which today might be considered as charity. He explained that the word once carried connotations of affection, love, esteem, and caring, and he urged us to adopt these qualities in dealing with our patients.

Dr. Ellis began his address by proudly proclaiming that The Society of Thoracic Surgeons “is now recognized as the spokesman for thoracic surgery in the United States.” He went on to emphasize the need for an active and vigorous organization to represent our profession due to the many forces that buffet medicine. He espoused the practice of eternal vigilance concerning the changing nature of society and the importance of developing effective responses to those changes. He bemoaned the fact that in a then-recent survey, confidence in physicians had dropped 30 points compared to the prior decade. Presumably, this change in opinion was related to the accusation that doctors were insensitive to patient needs and “preoccupied with science or money or both.”

Later in his speech, Dr. Ellis acknowledged that criticism of our profession was not a new phenomenon. He laid out the paradoxical problem: 75% to 80% of the population is satisfied with their own doctors and the care they have received, yet the majority think that the system responsible for health care “is in bad shape.” He reminded us that our patients make up a large proportion of the voting public and compromise an important constituency. “We must therefore restore the public’s faith and confidence in us as individuals, as well as in our profession,” he said.

Dr. Ellis emphasized “the human element that underlies all doctor-patient relationships.” He questioned whether something has been lost as we have developed a more scientifically advanced and technically oriented practice. He also proposed that we should focus on excellence, as it implies a “striving for the higher standards in every phase of life.”

He told us that we need to work on “improving our techniques and talents of communicating,” and also stated that “our future will be profoundly influenced by our ability to communicate with each other, the general public, and our patients.” He pointed out that by taking the time to clearly communicate our purposes and expectations with those who are assisting in the care of our patients, we can likely effect an “improvement in patient care.” His opinion was that “the medical profession as a whole has been negligent in not communicating more directly with the press,” and he called on us to be “equally willing to deny overly optimistic evaluations of our profession as we are to refute negative statements.”
Dr. Ellis said that the most important communications occur between doctors and patients, and he noted that patients frequently complain about “the doctor’s lack of clear-cut explanation concerning diagnosis and treatment and the frequent use of incomprehensible medical jargon.” He called on doctors to educate patients about their illness and the various treatment methods. He decried the results of studies that indicated “a lack of warmth and friendliness on the part of the doctor and his failure to take into account the patient’s concerns and personal expectations.”

Later, Dr. Ellis indicated that “modern physicians, particularly thoracic surgeons, are susceptible to the accusation of having lost touch with their patients.” In his view, an increasing emphasis on technology has led to an impersonal aspect of the practice of medicine and has made it more difficult to “establish and maintain a warm and human relationship with our patients.” He believed that empathy was what was lacking and ended his speech by quoting Hippocrates—claiming that heeding this advice from long ago will do much to benefit not only our patients but also our profession and each of us as individuals: “Where there is love of humanity, there will be love of the profession.”