

Pride in Our Profession

Arthur T. Johnson

“You can be a physician and save people one at a time, or be a biomedical engineer and save them a thousand at a time.” That’s what I have been telling my undergraduate students for years now. It has not been my intention to disparage those who want to enter the medical profession and care for those in need, but rather to ennoble the field of biomedical engineering and to express my pride in the much under-appreciated activities of professionals who have now made possible miraculous diagnostics, treatments, and cures.

Herbert Hoover expressed it very nicely by saying:

It is a great profession. There is the fascination of watching a figment of the imagination emerge through the aid of science to a plan on paper. Then it moves to realization in stone or metal or energy. Then it brings jobs and homes to men. Then it elevates the standards of living and adds to the comforts of life. That is the engineer’s high privilege.

The great liability of the engineer compared to men of other professions is that his works are out in the open where all can see them. His acts, step by step, are in hard substance. He cannot bury his mistakes in the grave like the doctors. He cannot argue them into thin air or blame the judge like the lawyers. He cannot, like the politicians, screen his shortcomings by blaming his opponents and hope the people will forget. The engineer simply cannot deny he did it. If his works do not work, he is damned.

On the other hand, unlike the doctor, his is not a life among the weak. Unlike the soldier, destruction is not his purpose. Unlike the lawyer, quarrels are not his daily bread. To the engineer falls the job of clothing the bare bones of science with life, comfort, and hope. No doubt as the years go by people forget what engineer did it, even if they ever knew. Or some politician puts his name on it. Or they credit it to some promoter who used other people’s money. But the engineer himself looks back at the unending stream of goodness which flows from his successes with satisfaction that few professions may know. And the verdict of his fellow professional is all the accolade he wants

And, although Hoover was a civil engineer talking mostly about civil engineering, the pride that he expresses comes through for engineers of every kind.