

## THE MEDICAL SCHOOL

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A newspaper headline informed us recently that Columbus might be selected as the site of a new medical school for Georgia. On further reading it was apparent that while the announcement made good eye-catching headline material, there were more than a few ifs and speculations connected with the proposal.

It would indeed be a fine thing for the Columbus area to have a medical school, but medical schools do not appear miraculously out of nowhere in the fashion of new factories or hotels. In addition to many other things, the groundwork for such a project must be laid well in advance by the local medical community itself and have the backing of the State Medical Association. The doctors in such an area not only should be of excellent caliber, but should also have shown enough interest in academic medicine to offer an environment favorable to such an undertaking. And frankly there is little evidence at present that enough of the physicians here are willing to sacrifice the time and effort to create such an environment.

There are those who recall with some misgiving that the recently revived medical school idea—like more bridges for the river, Interstate highways, greater new industry—was a convenient suggestion fed to a political campaigner as another bit of fodder for local political oratory aimed at gathering votes. Except for a brief mention, it failed to stir up much interest at the time. Campaign promises are only the fog from which dream castles are built and, like the fogs, disappear as quickly in the light and heat of day. Few real politicians take them seriously.

However, the ex-campaigner is now governor and while he may not initially have qualified as a real politician, he seems to have learned fast. The new headline though stems from a statement (and only a statement) that he thinks Georgia needs a third medical school and that he thinks it should be located in Muscogee County.

In reading the small print it seems that the governor's pronouncement was solicited following the disclosure that a subcommittee of the Science and Technology Commission had proposed that a study be made to see if a new medical school is needed by the state, and if it is needed, where it should be located. (Although the MAG has been investigating this problem for some time, this particular political study has not only yet to begin but the proposal to make the study has yet to be approved.)

Columbus and Muscogee County might seem like a logical spot for a medical school to local enthusiasts, but there are undoubtedly local enthusiasts in Savannah, Macon,

Athens and Albany who would disagree. Geographically, Macon (and even Albany) can argue more logically about strategic location. From the standpoint of medical progressiveness both Macon and Savannah have the advantage. Because of the established location of the main campus of the University of Georgia there, Athens has much to offer (and has already been considered seriously by the MAG and The Board of Regents). Of course, too, the metropolitan area of Atlanta itself is more than large enough to support and furnish material for two medical schools.

If a medical school is to be awarded to an area as a political plum, it is well to reflect soberly on this area's persistently strong Republican sentiment voting record in past elections. Politically, when the chips are down and the cards to be played, there will be little reason for a Democratic governor (a realist by now, with debts due elsewhere) to be grateful for the lack of voting he got in this area.

Were a decision to be made tomorrow, it would take six to eight years to create a medical school. It has also been demonstrated repeatedly that the initial building of a medical school and getting it into operation (estimated now at 40 to 60 millions) is only a drop in the bucket, compared to the continuing annual costs of maintaining its facilities and providing the personnel and faculty with competitive salaries. It is not a project to be undertaken lightly.

Nevertheless, medical schools have been built by political whim before and eventually survived. It would be a wonderful asset to this area and its support (in theory, at least) by the local medical community can be counted on. We should be grateful to Governor Maddox for giving a new impetus to the idea.

If Muscogee County is serious about wanting to locate the school here, it is time to begin finagling, pulling strings and applying political pressures. And perhaps since it will of necessity be a state school and a long time coming, to make sure that the next governor is elected from this congressional district. It is not yet time to apply for a position as dean, nor to start recruiting faculty.

Note: A Third medical school, *Mercer University School of Medicine*, was founded in 1982 with the main campus in Macon, Georgia.

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