

We need the White Coat Ceremony more than ever

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On a late summer Sunday morning in 1983, Pam walked into the 30th Street Station in Philadelphia to pick up her friend, Jane, who'd arrived on the train from New York. Despite the fact that neither Pam nor Jane had a reason to be in the hospital that day, Pam wore her white coat and her stethoscope to greet her friend. Her pockets bulged with the paraphernalia carried by most third-year medical students: two handbooks, a reflex hammer, an otoscope, several pens and penlights, a tourniquet and several unopened packages of gauze, syringes, tongue depressors and Q-tips. That week Pam and Jane would start their ward rotations; they'd finally get to spend some time with actual patients, participate on rounds with the team, watch surgical cases in the operating room, and sit with attending physicians or residents as they saw patients in out-patient clinics. They were leaving behind the years of classrooms and lectures. For both friends, wearing their short white coats represented an enormous milestone in the years-long quest toward an MD degree. Now they were almost really doctors. Their new white coats legitimized them, symbolized their entry into this profession. Wearing them, the friends held their heads higher and they certainly took themselves more seriously. In the train station, Jane teased her friend Pam on seeing her so ready for action, but they both understood the pride and excitement of wearing the white coat.

Nearly every August, medical schools gear up for another class of new students to begin their journey toward being physicians. Today more than 100 of the 154 accredited medical schools in the United States put white coats on their students during the orientation process, before students even set foot into a classroom or an anatomy lab. In "The White Coat Ceremony," faculty



Heather Bonilla, class of 2029, at her recent White Coat Ceremony at the CUNY School of Medicine.

place the ubiquitous uniform on the shoulders of new students. Many schools have students take the Oath of Hippocrates, which reminds students to consider their patients before all else. A few medical schools ask their incoming class to develop their own oath. At the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, in New York, the Class of 2026 pledged, among other things, to see patients as partners, to be humble and compassionate, to "combat present injustices" and improve access to care.¹ The ceremony is intended to welcome students into the profession of medicine and to remind them of the expectations and responsibilities of that profession.

These ceremonies seem ever more significant as medicine sinks under the pressures of corporatization and technological complexity. A recent Commonwealth Fund report noted that among the 11 wealthiest nations in the world, the U.S. spends the most on health care (16.8 percent of its GDP compared with next highest country, Germany, at 11.7 percent) and yet ranks last in terms of access to health care, equity in health care and health outcomes.² The electronic medical record has all but stripped any evidence of the "care" in U.S. health care. Patients are often unhappy because they cannot get an appointment, the doctor spends too little time or looks only at their computer screen, the bills are exorbitant and dense, and biases, racism, and classism continue to plague nearly all aspects of medicine. Doctors are

often unhappy because they feel undervalued, disrespected, underpaid and generally frustrated. Despite all this gloom, U.S. students continue to apply to medical schools in ever increasing numbers, and those ultimately accepted are among the brightest, most accomplished, most altruistic and generous-hearted people one could ever hope to meet. The White Coat Ceremony exists as a starting point for students to grasp that most essential aspect of the profession: that as doctors we are all people taking care of people.

The actual origins of the ceremony focused on welcoming students to that profession. Dating back to the Flexner report of the early 1900s, traditional medical education involved two years of classroom and lab learning followed by two years of clerkships and direct patient-facing learning. Students moved from undergraduate education to medical school without a big shift in their classroom setting, and they dressed the part. That is, they continued to wear their jeans and T-shirts as they had previously done in college. In 1989, a frustrated faculty member at the University of Chicago medical school approached the Dean of students at the time, Norma Wagoner, MD, (AQA, University of Cincinnati College of Medicine, 1984, Faculty) and spoke about the lack of professionalism among students in his classrooms as evidenced by their grubby clothes. Together the professor and the Dean came up with the White Coat Ceremony and invited Holly Humphrey, MD (AQA, University of Chicago Pritzker School of Medicine, 1983) to be the keynote speaker. Dr. Humphrey was at that time director of the medicine residency program and subsequently became head of the Josiah Macy Foundation. In this first ceremony, the new students donned their clean, white coats, and in addition, took the Oath of Hippocrates, a rite previously reserved for medical students only upon graduation. Of that first ceremony, Dean Wagoner noted, "Our interest was in helping the students see that professionalism was the most important part of this transition from undergrad to medical school."³ The idea took hold in other schools, and in 1993 the first White Coat Ceremony took place at the Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons, supported by Drs. Arnold Gold (AQA, University of Louisville School of Medicine, 1939) and Linda Lewis (AQA, West Virginia School of Medicine, 1965). Schools around the country began to hold their own ceremonies. Dr. Gold, who went on to found the Arnold P. Gold Foundation for

Humanism in Health care and the Gold Foundation, is often considered the originator of the ceremony.

Critics of the White Coat Ceremony point to the notion of "Imposter Syndrome" that plagues most medical students at some point. The white coat might represent expertise where little exists (yet). Students worry that talking to patients about their care, their illness or their death while wearing their white coat might be disingenuous when they are actually so limited in knowledge and experience. But even seasoned clinicians will sometimes admit that Imposter Syndrome never fully goes away. There's an element of "fake it 'til you make it" in learning how to talk to patients. Another criticism is that the white coat seeks to distinguish a medical professional from a non-medical professional and creates a false, some would say unearned, hierarchy.

Medical school is very hard and the process often grossly tarnishes the shiny goodness of its students. Nonetheless, amidst all the negative and damaging aspects of medicine and medical education today, the White Coat Ceremony continues to inspire students and remind them that they join a community. The purpose of their efforts, and of medicine as a whole, is noble and true. As Dr. Wagoner noted more than 30 years after the original ceremony in Chicago, "Helping students to understand what it means to be a professional, not just what the profession means, is perhaps more important than ever. The core of being a doctor is caring for people."³

In the 30th Street Station in 1983, Pam manifested another kind of Imposter Syndrome. She couldn't draw blood and could barely make sense of the thumps she could hear on the chest under the stethoscope. But she understood that wearing a white coat brought her into a community of people committed to caring for others. No ceremony had placed it on her, but she wore her white coat with pride and confidence.

References:

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