

A beacon for challenging times

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At over 300 feet tall, the Pharos was a towering presence that guided ships safely into the harbor at Alexandria. Now, more than ever, the profession of medicine needs a beacon that will offer ideas and inspiration to guide physicians, health care professionals, and educators in an ever-changing and challenging landscape. For generations, the Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Medical Society has sought to serve in this role by illuminating the values of professionalism and humanism, and to offer a vision for excellence in medicine. What will that look like moving forward?

In 2011, I was fortunate to be part of a team that received an AΩA Professionalism Award to promote reflective practice and identity formation, both relatively new concepts at the time, among medical students. A core activity involved writing a statement of purpose when the students were just beginning medical school. The statement was to represent the student's vision, as clear and detailed as possible, of the activities of an "ideal doctor," and we encouraged students to use it to guide behavior throughout their careers. The idea behind this activity was not that students would achieve the ideal; in fact, a wealth of literature and research on the 'hidden curriculum' of medical education suggests that disconnects between the realities of medical practice and students' ideals often lead to cynicism and burnout. Rather, we posited that a clear statement of ideals could provide students with a reference point for how to approach their practice in any system even if their ideal could not be fully realized due to the system's inherent constraints and tensions. In other words, the ideals statement would be a personalized beacon guiding students into a harbor of professional values and behaviors, despite the myriad obstacles in their paths.

In my role as Director of Medical Education Research at Penn State College of Medicine, I often meet with junior colleagues at the start of their career in academic medicine, and I usually share with them a poem by William Stafford:

There's a thread you follow. It goes among things that change. But it doesn't change.
People wonder about what you are pursuing.
You have to explain about the thread.
But it is hard for others to see.
While you hold it you can't get lost.
Tragedies happen; people get hurt or die; and you suffer and get old.
Nothing you do can stop time's unfolding.
You don't ever let go of the thread.¹

This poem has guided my career. My personal thread is relationships in health care. My life's work as a doctor, teacher, health services researcher, and educational scholar connects in one way or another back to relationships in health care. I firmly believe that our clinical effectiveness as physicians is directly influenced by the health of our relationships with the patients we serve, the colleagues we work with, and the learners we educate. My own ideals statement reminds me of the power of relationships to overcome obstacles, to provide a safe space in which to make difficult decisions, and to combat the loneliness of illness. I believe that relationships are our most important superpower. In today's world and its focus on winning over compromise, individuals over communities, and revenue over mission, it is easy to feel lost. It is now, in this time, that relationships are most important. A good friend and colleague recently shared a quote by historian, author, activist Professor Howard Zinn that, for me, brings this message home:

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To be hopeful in bad times is not just foolishly romantic. It is based on the fact that human history is a history not only of cruelty, but also of compassion, sacrifice, courage, kindness. What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. If we remember those times and places—and there are so many—where people have behaved magnificently, this gives us the energy to act, and at least the possibility of sending this spinning top of a world in a different direction. And if we do act, in however small a way, we don't have to wait for some grand utopian future. The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory.³

Like the ideals statement with the medical students and the concept of a “thread” to guide our careers, we all could use a gentle reminder from time to time that connects us back to the reasons we decided to pursue medical careers in the first place. Such reminders are what enable the droplets of small actions that can coalesce into an ocean of change.

In thinking about *The Pharos*, I realize that I have much to learn as our team takes up the extraordinary task of shepherding the publication into an uncertain future in health care. Given that caveat, it strikes me that the light of *The Pharos* shines both inward and outward. It provides nourishment and professional sustenance for AΩA members quarterly, and it provides a voice of reason, humanism, and professionalism for the broader medical community. In his editorial from the summer 2025 issue, Dr. Byyny wrote: “AΩA recognizes that evolving medicine must continue to be grounded in professional values, and that the combination of leadership and professionalism will have a synergistic and positive impact on the profession and its patients.”² I believe *The Pharos* can and should be a guiding voice in that process. The increasing influence of corporate financing structures, reliance on AI-driven algorithms without consideration of the person at the heart of the case, and reduction of relationships to transactions must be challenged. While I would like to see the publication on the desk of every health care CEO, medical school dean, and department chair and have its articles quoted in commencement speeches, keynote addresses, and boardrooms, what I REALLY dream about is a future where its articles are quoted

during daily rounds and in the clinics, and passed among personnel on the front lines to nurture their ideals and enable small everyday actions, creating an ‘infinite succession of presents’ that ultimately change the world. *The Pharos* can and needs to increasingly be a beacon to connect all in medicine back to their thread—that which is in their own true hearts and led them to the wonderful profession of medicine.

I hope you will consider submitting your narratives, perspectives, poetry, analyses, and essays to the journal. We are in this together, and together we will lead each other into a future where we are all truly worthy to serve the suffering.

References

1. Stafford W. The Way It Is. In: *Ask Me: 100 Essential Poems*. Minneapolis: Graywolf Press. 2014.
2. Byyny RL. Reflecting on 123 of bolstering and cultivating the profession of medicine. *Pharos Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Med Soc*. 2025 Summer, 2–8.
3. Zinn, Howard. *You Can't Be Neutral on a Moving Train: A Personal History of Our Times*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1994.



Have an idea that is burning to be shared? Have a poem, historical account, or perspective that needs to be seen? Send it to *The Pharos*!

The Pharos looks for articles, poetry, historical works, conceptual pieces, and essays that connect to the practice of medicine and deepen our community's conversations around the AΩA motto: “Be Worthy to Serve the Suffering.”

Submission instructions are available at:
[www.alphaomegaalpha.org/
the-pharos/submission-information](http://www.alphaomegaalpha.org/the-pharos/submission-information)