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Educating Tomorrow's Doctors: The Thing That Really Matters Is That We Care

ABSTRACT

The unique purpose of medical schools is to select and educate competent, caring physicians capable of meeting society's expectations for health care. The author discusses this purpose first in the context of liberal education, which provides a broad perspective essential in the education of doctors and other professionals. Such an education can be achieved partly by how medical students are selected and by effectively uniting it with professional learning. The most important goal of liberal education is to promote intellectual wholeness as a lifelong pursuit of physicians.

Second, the author reviews medical curricula, which have been slowly evolving away from a focus on providing instruction and toward one of producing learning. This new approach is a more rational one, and can be seen in some schools' reductions of lectures and increases in team teaching and problem-based learning, and earlier exposure of students to patients, especially in ambulatory

care settings. An important role of medical educators is to provide enough free time for students to learn, and to pay attention to the "informal curriculum," where the unwritten ethical codes of medicine are revealed.

The author then turns to issues of professionalism, especially that elusive part that goes beyond expertise. He emphasizes that the training of tomorrow's doctors is ultimately a public goal, and that medical schools must help restore public trust in doctors by selecting and nurturing professionals who see medicine in a broad social context. He reiterates that a liberally educated doctor is most likely to have such an outlook, and concludes by urging medical educators to remember that there is no substitute for a doctor's competence, caring, and professionalism expressed in the context of a liberally educated mind. And that the most important thing that educators can do as they bend to their task is to care.

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Medical school faculty play profound roles in America's health care delivery, and in the continuum of research that advances health in the public interest. But the unique purpose of a medical school is to select and educate competent, caring physicians capable of meeting society's expectations, because

no one else does this. I am an advocate of that unique purpose, which is the underlying focus of this essay.

I want to discuss learning, but with as much emphasis on the products of the educational process as on process itself. I want to discuss professionalism, but especially that elusive part of professionalism that goes beyond expertise. And I want to explain why what we in academic medicine do as we train tomorrow's doctors is ultimately public in purpose. Today's tendency to treat medicine as a business, health care as a commodity, patients as covered lives or consumers, and doctors as providers threatens not only academic medicine but the core values of our profession. My most important message is that a liberal education is the best foundation for sustaining the values of our profession and for cultivating the kind of doctors our country needs most.

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