



The Virtuous Student Physician

*A System of Professional Development for
Students*

*in the College of Human Medicine
at Michigan State University*



Authorship: This document and its logo were produced by Ruth Hoppe, but it represents a synthesis of inputs from several CHM faculty. Terry Stein, chaired the College of Human Medicine Task Force on Medical Student Professional Behaviors. Its members included: Robert Bridgham, Howard Brody, David Engstrom, Shelagh Ferguson-Miller, Jake Foglio, Wanda Lipscomb, Harold Sauer, Sharleen Sakai, and Sally Sprafka. Howard Brody chaired the Task Force Subgroup that developed the CHM virtues. Later inputs have come from Christine Shafer, Jane Smith, and Father Clayton Thomason (1999).

Since its authorship, a variety of curricular and extra-curricular activities have been developed aimed at engaging students and faculty in an ongoing process of dialogue and reflection. Individuals key to these planning efforts have included Jake Foglio, Clayton Thomason, Christine Shafer, Dianne Singleton, Wanda Lipscomb, Ruth Hoppe, many student members of the Group on Professional Development, and many faculty preceptors in the Mentor Program (2001).

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Through its Task Force on Professional Development of Medical Students (1994), faculty and students in the College of Human Medicine have articulated a set of desirable professional attributes that serve as examples of professional virtue for medical students. These attributes are clustered into six categories:

1. Competence
2. Honesty
3. Compassion
4. Respect for Others
5. Professional Responsibility
6. Social Responsibility

As stated by the Task Force, “each attribute is really a journey toward an ideal goal; no physician has actually reached the goal, and every physician is capable of at least some improvement with regard to each attribute. Virtue is characterized by both having selected the correct goal, and having made reasonable progress in one’s journey toward it, commensurate with one’s level of experience as a student or physician.”

These attributes are embodied in various codes of professional ethics and the CHM Matriculation and Graduation Oaths. **As faculty, we have become convinced that the furtherance of virtue in students at the College of Human Medicine is served by going beyond listing of attributes and the taking of oaths. We believe we have a responsibility to help our students in their quest for virtue as young health professionals.**

Toward that end, the College has adopted a graduation requirement, which states: *“The College expects that the medical students will conduct themselves in an honest, responsible, and professional manner within the educational programs, in their interactions with peers, faculty, and patients, as well as in their activities beyond scheduled learning experiences. They are expected to abide by the Student Oath administered at the time of matriculation and to demonstrate the ability to function ethically and humanely.”*

We wish to create a system whereby the attributes of a virtuous physician, as we have defined them, are operationalized for students such that they can be clear about expectations, can better monitor their own behavior and progress toward virtue, and can meet the professional behavior graduation requirement of the College. Also, we wish for students to be able to self-correct and to assist their peers in their own professional development. By the time of graduation from the College, we wish students to have explicitly considered multiple instances of professional conduct, by themselves and by others, to have capability to link such conduct to concepts of virtue for health professionals, and to have conducted themselves in a manner consistent with the various codes of conduct.

While we wish to have students assume responsibility for their professionalism at the point of entry to medical school, as faculty we intend to assist students in their development. We believe the way in which professional development occurs is through iterative steps of *reflection, dialogue and praxis* (doing), experienced in the community.

We have therefore structured opportunities for students to reflect upon and discuss many of the complexities regarding professional behavior that emerge in the various environments that are part of the learning experience at the College of Human Medicine.

We also commit ourselves as faculty to the same journey toward growth as professionals and toward professional virtue. We will strive to model the conduct we wish to see, we will assume some responsibility for the environments in which students are placed, and we will engage in dialogue with students about conduct, both our own and theirs.

The Virtues: Goals and Indicators of Professional Development

The following indicators of professional development are designed to complement the behavioral goals associated with each attribute of the virtuous physician. With recognition that no set of behaviors so listed can be exhaustive, these indicators are provided only as examples that may be helpful to the student entering the profession and the College.

Competence

Goals: The student masters the basic knowledge, skills, and attitudes relevant to medical diagnosis and therapy. He or she accepts this mastery as a lifelong responsibility, recognizing that medical school is just the first phase of medical education. The student is motivated to learn not merely out of scientific curiosity or to perform well on examinations, but also from concern for the well-being of patients who will entrust themselves to his or her care. The student recognizes limits to his or her competence; all physicians, no matter how expert, have gaps in their medical competence and owe it to their patients to be fully cognizant of those gaps and to seek outside assistance when necessary.

Indicators: A student striving for competence will take responsibility for learning individually and in a group setting. This is demonstrated in many ways, including preparing for and engaging in various learning venues, striving for mastery in all instances, and being able to accurately reflect on the adequacy of personal knowledge and skill development. The student will identify and begin to address personal limitations and other barriers to learning and growth. The student will also be able to reflect with colleagues on the success of group work. The student will avoid any behaviors that might reasonably endanger the safety and welfare of the patient.

Honesty

Goals: The student is honest in working with patients and professional colleagues. The student recognizes that medicine is fundamentally dependent upon accurate knowledge, so that any acceptance of untruth, no matter how inconsequential it may seem at first, threatens to undermine the very foundations of medical practice.

Indicators: A student striving for honesty will accurately report actions and events, and avoid cheating, plagiarism, and misrepresentation of the truth. Everything presented in an examination will be an accurate reflection of the student's personal knowledge and ability. In the clinic, the student will only record on a patient's chart data that have been observed and verified. In research, the student will assure that all data are recorded fully and accurately, that publications only include data that have been obtained by appropriate research methodology, and that credit in publication is taken only for work actually performed. In relationships with patients, the student will answer questions

openly and accurately. The student recognizes that a commitment to honesty requires not only that the student avoid any dishonest behavior but also report observed instances of dishonesty to appropriate authorities, regardless of his or her relationship to the subject of the report.

Compassion

Goals: The student is compassionate, using empathy to sense others' experiences and concerns. He or she appreciates the experience of illness, including the suffering and fear, and learns to respond to that fear and suffering in a humane, healing manner.

Indicators: A student striving to be compassionate will identify, articulate, and respond to the fear, suffering, and hopes of patients and their families. He or she will seek to assist colleagues in dealing with the challenges of professional work. The student will seek feedback on the effect of his or her behavior on others.

Respect for Others

Goals: The student maintains attitudes and behaviors that communicate respect. The value and dignity of others is respected in all encounters. Because respect requires appreciation of the feelings, beliefs, and experiences of others, the student learns about different social and cultural groups so persons from such groups may be treated with a deeper understanding.

Indicators: A student striving to respect others will respect the personal and sexual boundaries of others, and will avoid sexism, racism, and sexual orientation bias in interactions. He or she will be able to articulate and embrace the positive aspects of difference among people and demonstrate an awareness of how such differences affect personal interactions. Respect will be shown for multiple perspectives in clinical and educational settings. The student will demonstrate a commitment to resolve conflict in a collegial manner; show sensitivity to the needs, feelings, and wishes of health team members; and demonstrate humility in interactions with others. Respect for the dignity of others will be demonstrated by strict adherence to confidentiality. The student will respect patients' privacy and right to control access to personal information about their lives and health by disclosing information only to those who are directly involved in the care of the patient.

Professional Responsibility

Goals: The student realizes that as a professional he or she has a responsibility to assure that professional goals are met in all settings. The student understands that certain types of personal conduct seriously threaten the professional goals of medicine. He or she recognizes that these unacceptable behaviors, notably, substance abuse, sexual overtures towards patients, and other abuses of the power that society has granted the profession, need to be strictly avoided.

Indicators: A student accepting professional responsibility will contribute to a positive learning and health care delivery environment. The student will be present and punctual for activities that are integral parts of the learning experience and patient care; he or she will take responsibility to notify others, in advance whenever possible, when unavoidable absence or tardiness occurs. He or she will be able both to give up some personal needs to meet the needs of patients and appropriately displace clinical responsibility when personal needs demand it. At a level appropriate to a student, he or she will cope

with the challenges, conflicts, and ambiguities inherent in professional health care. The student will demonstrate a willingness and ability to identify, discuss, and/or confront both his or her own problematic behaviors and those involving colleagues.

Social Responsibility

Goal: The student realizes that all people, both physicians and patients, live in societies that profoundly influence an individual's health or illness status. The student honors the obligation to conduct him- or herself in a trustworthy manner and to act upon the responsibility inherent in the trust traditionally bestowed upon physicians and other professional groups.

Indicators: A socially responsible student will be able to identify the multiple social factors that threaten the health of patients. He or she will be proactive, outside the singularity of the doctor-patient relationship, in addressing the social factors that adversely affect the health of patients.