

Letter to a new medical student

by Daniel K. Sokol

Congratulations! How many others would love to be in your shoes, tracing the footsteps of Hippocrates, Lister, Osler and other greats of medicine. Why this letter? I have some advice which you may find helpful. A secret? Not really. The talking fox, in *The Little Prince*, had a real secret: "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye".

My simple message concerns the moral dimension of medicine. Medicine is fundamentally about man and, whenever humanity is involved, so too is morality. Why? Because, as social creatures, we have duties to each other. I shouldn't lie to you, or steal from you, or insult you for no good reason, for example. And we also have duties to ourselves, for we can let ourselves down too. As a medical student, and later as a doctor, you will be dealing with patients, relatives and colleagues. More specifically, you will help patients who are by nature sick, vulnerable and perhaps confused by an unfamiliar clinical environment.

The task is all the more complicated because whenever we try to help patients, we risk harming them. An aspirin tablet can trigger an anaphylactic reaction; a caesarian uncontrollable bleeding. As time is limited and resources scarce, you may also deprive others of needed assistance. Giving a heart to a patient with severe cardiomyopathy (an abnormality of the heart muscle) may entail the death of another patient in desperate need of the organ. Medicine is a deeply moral endeavour.

Throughout your formal training, ethics will not feature as much as the technical dimension and the temptation will be to dismiss the subject as irrelevant, unimportant or inconvenient to the immediate task of helping the patient. My message is this: do not yield to this temptation, however strong, but take the ethical issues in medicine as seriously as you do the technical ones. This simply means seeing ethics as integral to the proper care of your patients. Just as you want to increase your understanding of the factual aspects of medicine, so should you want to deepen your moral understanding.

I have on occasion heard your peers say that ethics is merely a matter of law. You should of course consider the law when deciding how to act, but the law is no moral panacea. Sometimes, the law is silent, or permits several options, and while morals may form the basis of law, there is much that the law permits but that morality forbids. A student who laughs at the misfortune of a dying patient is not acting unlawfully, but may still be morally at fault. Law often represents the lowest acceptable measure of morality. As a doctor-in-training, you should be striving for a higher standard.

You will be faced with many diagnostic and therapeutic mysteries in years to come, but you will also encounter ethical puzzles. What should you do or say if you made a medical error that no one else noticed? How should you handle racist or abusive patients? When should you withdraw life-sustaining treatment? Like the medical ones, these problems will need to be diagnosed and resolved, and may require skill, creativity, humility, wisdom and courage. In ancient times, doctors were philosophers. Today, a good doctor - and a good medical student - remains a practical philosopher.

The ethical aspects in modern medicine tend to be neglected because, unlike physical abnormalities, they are difficult to see. The fox was right: what is essential is invisible to the eye.

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