



View From the Pyramids: White Coats

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EDITORIAL

Just as the proverbial freshly sharpened pencils and new box of crayons usher in the new school year, the white coat is the sign of a fresh batch of altruistic medical students about to start their journey toward a career in medicine. In white coat ceremonies across the country, students don short white coats, indicating they are in training. As the years pass and they graduate, they are given the honor of wearing full-length white coats, indicating they have passed that first milestone of training. These ceremonies convey meaning and responsibility—even if the new doctor doesn't feel deserving of the honor themselves.

For some, the white coat never feels as if it is earned, no matter what the length. While medical schools select students for their knowledge, service, attention to detail, conscientiousness and professional demeanor, those students may never feel like the status is earned. Imposter syndrome can haunt students, making them believe that they were selected wrongly and they can never live up to the responsibility. Indeed, many doctors find the very traits that caused them to be selected as students are the same traits that lead to imposter syndrome: namely, perfectionism and, dare I say, a tendency to neuroticism in some.

While students outwardly may have a pedigreed application in which all the boxes are checked, inwardly they may have that seed of doubt that can grow into an incompatibility with the messiness of medicine. How can one who leans toward perfection be comfortable with the unknowns and variables that make medicine an art? In my mind, these seeds begin to sprout the minute they take their first test—or even before they walk in the door. Over time, these seeds can become full-blown medical student burnout, or if graduated, physician burnout.

Andrew Taylor Still focused the foundations of osteopathic medicine on *mind, body and spirit* as all equally important. In the years since he established the first osteopathic medical school in Missouri, it seems medical schools increasingly select for mind only, forgetting the body and spirit are also important to the wholeness of the physician, as well as the patient. With such an emphasis, is it any wonder we have a generation of physicians who are uncomfortable with the uncertainties medicine brings, fueling one aspect of the epidemic of burnout the medical profession is currently encountering?

What if we as physicians walked the talk and remembered that we are a body triune ourselves? Would we be the examples that medicine can be compatible with a balanced human life experience? What if we taught resilience and mindfulness early in the path to medicine so we did not have to lose so many to burnout or worse, suicide? Perhaps it is time to put down the “superhero capes” we call white coats and recognize we all are humans first. While the ritual progression of the white coat is important, isn't life in the present moment just as important as the next milestone?

I am reminded of the thought attributed to the poet Rumi: “The wound is the place where Light enters you.” Perhaps we can heal these wounds in medicine by letting the light in and starting with ourselves. Time to color outside the lines a little and be ok with messy.

In gratitude,

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