



Guest Director's Corner

What a Gift to be Together: Highlights from the First Annual KNN Conference

By Wendy Peltier, MD

On September 29 and 30, 2022, the Kern National Network (KNN) hosted its first annual two-day conference in Milwaukee. This event brought together medical educators, students and others invested in education, to join the KNN's mission to promote Human Flourishing through the profession of medicine by fostering caring, character, and practical wisdom with innovative teaching methods and creation of an integrated framework. The conference was designed to Connect, Convene, and Catalyze towards Flourishing.

Background of the Kern National Network

Launching a Movement: This is not a project with an end date.
-John Luk, MD, Dell Medical School

Founded in 2017, the KNN is a network of seven schools across the country including the Medical College of Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health, Dell Medical School, Dartmouth Geisel School of Medicine, Mayo Clinic, University of California San Francisco School of Medicine and Vanderbilt University, who have launched a movement to transform medical education around caring and character, with support of a grant from the Milwaukee-based Kern Family Foundation. The KNN is closely tied to, but distinct from, the MCW Kern Institute, which is considered the program "hub."

KNN Network initiatives have been developed around several pivotal realms. They include:

- Achieving holistic medical school admissions
- Enhancing learner engagement
- Transforming the clinical learning environment with wellness and leadership
- Promoting faculty development and recognition
- Engaging care teams and health system leaders

Many innovative projects have emerged, with some examples being the “Take 5” faculty development videos at the Mayo Clinic around caring, character and practical wisdom, the formation of a KNN student network and “Becoming” series, a student essay contest around exemplars of character, and a six-module faculty development series on mobilizing character.

KNN leaders convened a dynamic, interactive conference to celebrate progress and outline the next phase of work. For many, this was the first opportunity to meet in person since the COVID-19 pandemic. For more detailed information about KNN initiatives and future goals, please review the poster gallery (link [HERE](#))

Why Flourishing?

The difference between health and flourishing are in deepening loving relationships and attending to all domains for clinician and patient well-being.

-Matthew T Lee, PhD, Baylor University

KNN leaders have focused on “human flourishing” to combat the current challenges brought on by the transactional, business models of health care that threaten provider vitality, humanism, and the care of vulnerable populations. This focus can transform medical education in an authentic way to promote character and caring in our students, faculty members, and healthcare teams.

While some view flourishing as purely aspirational, KNN leaders have taken deep dives into the philosophical constructs, seeking ways to create a holistic focus that can bridge differences, cultivate relationships, encourage intellectual humility, and spark a willingness to challenge assumptions. Various aspects of flourishing have been intensely studied by Dr Matthew Lee (plenary speaker) and others. Many facets of flourishing that rarely touch medical education include the domains of happiness and life satisfaction, mental and physical health, meaning and purpose, character and virtue, close social relationships, religion, and financial stability. Striving towards flourishing—even within a health ecosystem that is under fire—will hopefully lead to critical changes that can decrease provider burnout, mitigate bias, and empower future healthcare professionals with the skills to build new systems.

Workshop Highlights

It was a busy conference, filled with a wide range of sessions promoting dialogue and connection. In total, there were two plenary sessions, 28 workshop offerings, fourteen round table discussions, and a poster session! Topics ranged from creating psychological safety in the clinical learning environment, to promoting kindness through art as an antidote to stress, to a selective on creating happiness, to the power of narrative medicine and storytelling as mechanisms to promote caring and character, to flourishing in women leaders, to methods to

foster professional identity formation. As it was impossible to attend all offerings, I will simply provide a snapshot of some of my takeaways:

- Kindness is a natural antidote to stress and incivility, and seeing kindness or healing through visual imagery passively evokes kindness in others
- Character can be “caught” through life experience and role models, can be “taught” through language, knowledge and skills and can be “sought” through one’s choices and aligning purpose, value, and motivation
- Narrative writing, storytelling, and reflection through multi-media in medicine, are vital tools that can enhance empathy and compassion in our learners towards patients, colleagues, and themselves
- Emphasizing self-awareness, a key aspect of caring and emotional intelligence (EI), is essential to meaning and wellness for providers and educators. An analogy was shared using the illustration of the “Plimsoll line,” a reference mark on a ship's hull that indicates the maximum depth to which the vessel may be safely immersed when loaded with cargo. If one is close to their personal Plimsoll line, they may not have the capacity to take on more stress, work, and responsibilities without going under. Knowing where your balance lies is key to understanding the right balance. Avoidance of the superhuman mentality, so common in medicine, needs to be role-modeled and permission given within clinical and educational environments to not take on tasks beyond one’s load.
- Changing the culture of caring in medicine is hard work! Foundational to this effort is heightened focus on communication skills, patient-centered learning with early clinical exposure and better understanding of how caring actions can improve clinical and learning outcomes.

Putting it all together

Where is the music today in Medicine?

-Margaret Plews-Ogan, MD, MS, University of Virginia

Finally, my thoughts keep circling back to the closing plenary session by Dr. Plews-Ogan, an expert in practical wisdom, entitled “Wisdom in Action: Medicine as Music.” She first asked us to think of a wise person we know, the qualities they exemplify, and then reflect on, “How do you think they got that way?” We had busy chatter about this at our tables, with examples ranging from teachers, to famous individuals, to family members.

Dr. Plews-Ogan reviewed that wise persons have reflective, cognitive and affective capacities that allow them to act in the “right way, at the right time, for the right reason.” Ah, we all aspire to be “wise,” but how do we get there?

This was shared through review of key virtues and skills that are needed to truly practice the art of medicine, as well as acknowledging many of the current barriers to this practice in our present health system.

She carefully reviewed a poignant experience her family experienced with an ALS diagnosis for her young adult son. She painted the picture of their interactions with a caring neuromuscular specialist, who delivered the diagnosis in a way that balanced hope and reality. She reflected on each episode of care as if they were pieces within a symphony, and outlined the virtue and skills exhibited by their practitioner that exemplified both wisdom in the neuromuscular exam, EMG and differential diagnosis BUT ALSO wisdom in the communication skills and compassion desperately needed from the patient/family perspective in delivering such a devastating diagnosis.

My eyes welled during the presentation, as I have been in those shoes as a provider in my early days of medical practice in Neurology and recalled both the challenge—yet also the gift—of truly caring for a patient in trying times within the context of their family, values, and culture.

Just as creating good music requires attention to detail, lots of practice and courage, she reminded the audience that, “Wisdom is like great music for a practicing physician.” Her parting request, and inspiration, was to challenge us as medical educators to develop systems that elevate the true art of medical practice.

How to get involved

Since attending the conference, I have been lifted with gratitude for the ability to connect with MCW and KNN network colleagues in a special way, which sparked new ideas and collaborations far beyond what can occur in Zoom meetings. What a gift to be amongst a group of such talented, committed, and creative educators!

For further reading:

- 1) [KNN Integrated Framework](#)
- 2) [KNN Online Community](#)
- 3) [Kindness Media](#) #pictureabetterworld
- 4) [Values in Action \(VIA\) Character Strength Survey](#)
- 5) [Wellness Wheel, what's your score?](#)

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Transformational Times editorial board and student KNN members, presenting “Writing Our Hearts Out!” workshop on Narrative Medicine and Storytelling