



Seizing the Moment: Medicine's Social Contract and the COVID-19 Pandemic

by Fabrice Jotterand, PhD

People reveal their true selves during crises, and the reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic are no exception. In the last few weeks, first responders, nurses, health care workers, and physicians have stepped up to the plate to provide care and comfort to the tsunami of patients. Not only have these individuals demonstrated their professionalism, but they have displayed altruism, courage, and humility. These efforts, though, might not be enough to deal with the magnitude of the challenge, and the worst is likely ahead of us. Alas! Following the adage “better to light a candle than curse the darkness,” it is worth offering a glimmer of hope in these moments.

In normal times, there are many reasons to complain about our health care system. Failure to provide universal coverage, unjust distributions of resources, high cost, de-humanized practices, and high-profile malpractice lawsuits to name a few, are regularly scrutinized in academic circles and in the media. The very nature and commitment of the workers in the country’s health care systems to the social contract that binds medicine and society is questioned.

Despite the grim picture, the pandemic is an opportunity for practitioners to display and renew their sense of professionalism in medicine and to reinforce the importance of character development and professional identity formation in medical education. The commitment of healthcare professionals and the volunteerism observed among medical students to serve COVID-19 patients, is evidence that medicine’s pledge to society is as strong as ever.

The medical profession has demonstrated its loyalty to serve communities that need its expertise and help. More importantly, physicians have responded to the call to serve unselfishly (putting their own health at risks and spending countless hours in the clinic and away from their families), with courage

(remaining dedicated to the care of coronavirus patients despite the known and unknown of the pandemic), and with humility (working for the greater good).

Physicians who are putting themselves at-risk serve as role models for students and each other, having embodied and professed the true meaning of what is expected of a professional: a dedication to the highest moral standards of clinical practice in the service of others regardless of the context. So, there is light at the end of the tunnel!

The pandemic is a teaching moment highlighting how character traits like altruism, courage, and humility are not only intrinsic to the moral formation of trainees, but how they manifest in times of crisis.

Medicine must reposition itself as a gatekeeper for the health and wellbeing of our communities and medical schools must provide a transformational education focused on the meaning, boundaries, and requirements of medicine as a profession. Students must be offered the opportunity to experience medicine – not just as a “job” – but as an identity intrinsic to one life’s journey as person and professional. Medical educators and institutions devoted to the training of future physicians must seize the moment.

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