

Perspective/Opinion



The Theology, Medicine, and Culture Initiative at Duke Divinity School

By Farr Curlin, MD; Warren Kinghorn, MD, ThD and Brett McCarty, ThD

Here our colleagues at Duke Divinity School highlight a more tradition-specific example of how institutions with historic religious affiliations (e.g., Jewish, Catholic health care institutions, etc.) might offer a virtue-based approach to medical education that more closely align educational initiatives with a tradition's theological understanding and practices of a faithful health care vocation ...

[The Theology, Medicine, and Culture Initiative](#) (TMC) at Duke Divinity School seeks the renewal of health care through the theological and moral formation of health practitioners. Our mission is based on the foundational belief that education in health care is not just intellectual, but also moral. As an initiative grounded in Christian faith and practice, we seek to develop health professionals marked by their purposefulness, wisdom, justice, and respect for the dignity of every human as made in God's image.

We pursue this moral training in a contemporary health care context that is often demoralizing. Many health care students and practitioners are discovering that the purpose and joy with which they began their vocation has faded; they find themselves exhausted and disengaged, hardened toward patients, and purposeless in their work. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, half of physicians and nurses reported symptoms of burnout. Clinicians die by suicide at higher rates than the US population. Beyond this, even the health care students and practitioners who are not burned out are asking, "What is medicine's future?" Our systems are increasingly bureaucratized and focused on efficiency and output. Our care is increasingly unaffordable and

all too often inadequate for those on the socioeconomic margins. Our research paradigms incentivize and celebrate technology at the expense of humanity, without asking what all of our technology is for. If our current health care system is unsustainable, what might a health care look like that is rightly oriented toward vocational purpose, compassionate care, and justice?

At TMC, we want to create the capacity for our students to discover deep goods in the everyday practices of health care—a capacity philosopher Charles Taylor calls “articulacy”—and thus to gain a sense of purpose and joy in their calling. We believe that the teaching of Christian ethics has the opportunity to inculcate articulacy among students, opening up dialogue about the moral sources that create the conditions for both our virtues and our vices. This is true for a range of modern practices—from caring for the sick, preferring the marginalized, and living in solidarity with the suffering, to objectifying the body, racializing the social order, and imagining all of life as a profit-making enterprise. Cultivating articulacy among students involves enabling them to speak about and imagine the world in light of the moral traditions at work within contemporary health care. We situate such learning within a communal ecology. Dialogue partners and, even more importantly, *friends* are necessary to help us imagine and pursue what is good.

Our core formational program is the TMC Fellowship, in which we invite those with vocations to health care, especially medical and other health-professions students, to study with us in residence while they complete a two-year Master of Theological Studies (MTS) degree or our one-year residential Certificate in Theology and Health Care. The conceptual heart of the TMC Fellowship is found within a two-semester course called “Health Care in Theological Context.” This class articulates the relation of Christian tradition to suffering, illness, and disability, as well as to the institutions and practices of health care and bioethics. Students read memoirs of illness, theological and philosophical critiques of health care, and diverse theological perspectives on health and health care.

TMC Fellows also take a spiritual formation course, in which they learn spiritual disciplines such as meditative reading of Scripture and contemplative prayer from two licensed spiritual directors who also are medical practitioners, and listen to each other narrate their own vocational stories. As part of this course, TMC Fellows also engage in institutional contexts slightly aslant the standard pathways of modern health care. These range from shadowing clinicians who care for uninsured and underinsured residents in Durham’s Samaritan Health Center, to participating in the weekly activities of Reality Ministries, a local non-profit devoted to creating opportunities for teens and adults with and without developmental disabilities to experience belonging and kinship. We place Fellows in several other organizations, depending upon the experiences and interests of our Fellows.

Finally, Fellows participate in weekly discussions with faculty and outside speakers, often over a homemade meal, to share research in progress and discuss topics related to the health care vocation. These gatherings serve as language labs for students to learn to speak in new ways about the depth and breadth of the moral challenges faced within the practice of health care. Additionally, each Fellow is paired with a faculty mentor, and faculty host gatherings over meals

in their homes. Through coursework, spiritual formation, mentoring, and the sharing of meals, the work of personal and interpersonal transformation in the TMC Fellowship is intimately intermingled.



Our second program, a flexible, hybrid Certificate Program in Theology and Health Care, is designed for working health care practitioners who cannot relocate to Duke. In this program participants across the country study the intersection of Christian theology and health care while applying what they learn to their own health care contexts. They convene at Duke for two weeks per year and otherwise participate online. In 2021-22, we welcomed our first cohort of fourteen students who come from a range of health professions, including pediatrics, surgery, oncology, and nursing. These students take the two core courses described above, in addition to a survey of Biblical studies, church history, and theological ethics, and a spiritual formation course. In the program, they cultivate a community of formation –a community that has potential to nurture them throughout their careers. They also serve as natural mentors for younger practitioners and trainees in the TMC fellowship.

Our third program, the Healer's Vocation Course, is a multimedia curriculum we are designing for small groups of practitioners who will gather regularly over meals for fellowship, study, and conversation about how Christian ethics make a difference for health care practices. We aim through it to foster long-lasting friendships and networks within local institutions across health care.

In all of these ventures, we are working not only to invest deeply in those who study with us, but also, by sending out our students into the world of health care, to cultivate a national network of centers of excellence promoting the renewal of medicine through the moral formation of its practitioners. Through the habituation of intellectual and moral virtues and the cultivation of friendships, we seek to form clinicians with the agency and imagination to do transformative good in the world. In light of Christian tradition, “renewing health care” is not an abstract ideal but a genuine commitment to the real people who both need and give care.

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