



Perspective/Opinion

The Paul McHugh Program for Human Flourishing at Johns Hopkins University

By Margaret Chisolm, MD and Paul McHugh, MD

In this essay, our colleagues from Johns Hopkins University share their experience with character education and virtue development of medical students through an intentional focus on asking foundational questions often avoided in traditional discourse on professionalism ...

"I mean simply to make the human being more human, and that is some task for the teacher that I try to be..."

Elie Wiesel, <https://billmoyers.com/content/facing-hate-with-elie-wiesel/>

The practice of medicine is a moral enterprise – one human being caring for another – and the ‘big questions’ long considered in Western philosophy and the arts are central to physician training. This is true now more than ever, as physicians face growing pressure to set aside age-old norms and conscientious judgment in favor of “respecting” patients’ wishes – including their wishes to be killed or to remake themselves through hormones and plastic surgery – and medical trainees and practitioners are reporting unprecedented levels of burnout and alienation. Yet medical education continues to avoid examining these foundational questions – what it means to be human, to be a physician, and to lead a good life – with its students.

The [Paul McHugh Program for Human Flourishing](#) aims to restore the moral framework of medicine and to support the character formation and virtue development of medical students at Johns Hopkins University. To accomplish this, we have used a variety of arts and humanities pedagogical approaches to explore these “big questions” with medical students under the guidance of senior physician faculty.

First, we have sponsored a Longitudinal Scholars Program (LSP) in Human Flourishing for medical students, in which we meet monthly with first-year students to advise them on a flourishing-relevant scholarly research project and monthly with second-year medical students

to discuss readings from Leon Kass' [*Being Human: Core Readings in the Humanities*](#). The LSP emerged from a drop-in reading seminar for a few second-year students in the fall of 2015. Since the fall of 2018, the LSP has accepted sixteen medical students via a competitive application process, for whom mentorship occurs through all four years of medical school.

Second, in addition to the LSP activities that are focused on a select group of medical students, we have expanded our footprint at the medical school by offering multiple non-credit programs and for-credit courses open to any Johns Hopkins University pre-health or medical student, including one required and three elective medical school courses. All of our teaching uses the arts and humanities to help medical students explore the “big questions,” in support of our overall aim of character formation and virtue development. Through these and other offerings, the Paul McHugh Program for Human Flourishing faculty members have interacted with over 300 students.

Third, to reach the broader Johns Hopkins University community, we regularly host invited lectures by prominent intellectuals from around the world who have written about the relevance of Western and Judeo-Christian text to current life. Speakers have included Lydia Dugdale who spoke on *The Lost Art of Dying: Reviving Forgotten Wisdom* and Leon Kass who spoke on *Exodus: Suggestions for Human Flourishing*. These lectures range from seminar-style discussions offered exclusively to our medical students to public lectures that are widely promoted and attract large audiences of students and faculty from within our university and beyond.

Through these and other activities, the Paul McHugh Program for Human Flourishing has supported the character education and virtue development of medical students at Johns Hopkins. Through research publications and other scholarship, we are bringing moral formation back into focus in medical education more broadly. Building on these initiatives, our next step is to contribute to national network of medical students and physicians who will come together each month virtually and once a year in-person to engage in content focused on cultivating a life of virtue. This community of learning and practice will develop medical students of moral character who will in-turn serve as peer and faculty mentors to successive generations of medical students.

Our vision is that from this network will emerge the future leaders of academic medicine and medical practice.

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