

Perspective/Opinion



Virtue Ethics and Character Formation in Medicine: Our Approach at Columbia's Center for Clinical Medical Ethics

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In this essay, our colleagues from Columbia's Center for Clinical Medical Ethics describe a vision of curricular innovation focusing on the formation of virtues and the cultivation of flourishing in health profession students ...

Columbia's Center for Clinical Medical Ethics (CCME) aims to foster flourishing relationships between patients, doctors, and other medical professionals by supporting the ethical formation of medical trainees; encouraging true intellectual friendship across difference; and facilitating public engagement on diverse ethical issues.

This is a vision that fundamentally embraces virtue ethics and character formation, and we have worked to accomplish this goal to date through a variety of approaches. First, we host a weekly group of medical, nursing, and public health students, as well as medical residents, to discuss practical wisdom and issues related to faith and medicine over a brown bag lunch. The group has grown from a few students to more than twenty since its inception in the fall of 2020. Second, our Center hosted a Philosophy & Medicine Reading Group for medical students that met weekly from Fall 2019 through Spring 2021. This group studied primary texts alongside current philosophically rich articles to draw upon virtues necessary for the formation of physicians and to work through the covenantal nature of the doctor-patient relationship. Third, we hosted in 2021 two distinct reading groups for trainees and students—the first, on Lydia Dugdale's *The Lost Art of Dying: Reviving Forgotten Wisdom*, and the second on Elaine Scarry's,

On Beauty and Being Just. At their core, both books engage fundamental human questions of living and dying well, wisdom, beauty, and justice. Fourth, we teach ethics and character formation in Columbia's formal medical school curriculum through both lectures and a month-long clinical ethics elective, held three times yearly. Finally, in Fall 2021, we hosted our first annual colloquium on Medicine & the Art of Ethics. We focused on the topic of reckoning with the plague year, human finitude, and beauty. Participants included twenty national and international scholars, vocational artists, and physicians. We engaged the broader public through a webinar dedicated to the central themes of the colloquium.

The focus on the formation of virtues and cultivation of flourishing not only in individuals (e.g., physicians, students) but also for relationships (e.g., inter-professional relationships, patient-physician relationships) has oriented the ethos and labor of the CCME. But flourishing also requires attention to the hard work of discerning the mean between vices that emerge through excesses of abuse and deficiency. Put plainly, the discipline of ethics, including medical ethics, involves that difficult work of discovering something about what has already shaped and continues to shape people.

Not all shaping in the contemporary medical milieu is concerned with the formation of moral goods and the excellence of practical wisdom. Other competing goods and metaphors—economic, technological, and Babelic, to name a few—affect the ways people come to understand medical professionalism and responsibilities of caring for the sick and vulnerable. Consequently, it is essential that our Center and others committed to the moral formation of health practitioners perform the interrogative work of discovering the narratives, traditions, and practices that constrain and compel the people, and professionals, we are and are becoming.

With that in mind and building on the aforementioned initiatives, important next steps for the CCME are two-fold. First, our Center will partner with a team of scholars and practitioners to investigate the many constraints that shape healthcare workers in contemporary medical practice, including the academic halls and hospitals where young physicians, nurses, and other allied health professional students are educated. No matter which direction, or by what means, one is being formed, a critical interrogation of those narratives, traditions, and practices that shape the moral vision of healthcare workers will orient future research and aims. In this, the Center's outputs will take advantage of philosophical hermeneutics, social anthropologies, critical theories, and understandings of moral formation to interpret and discern what is shaping the moral imaginations and behaviors of physicians, nurses, and other healthcare workers, and how—with interest in not only the virtues but also the corrosive excesses and deficiencies of habit that demean and demoralize the experiences of flourishing and excite the cultivation of vices.

The second step is to organize a network of similarly oriented scholars and practitioners across allied institutions that can serve as mentors and guides to the next generation of health professions students. The practical vision is for mentors and students to meet monthly in a virtual format and then once yearly in person for a three- or four-day retreat. Not only will this

combination of regular virtual plus in-person meetings be conducive to growing familiar with content and to cultivating a life of virtue, it will also be invaluable for forging relationships for future leaders of deep moral character in academic medicine and medical practice.

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