

Vincent Shieh
M1 Trinity School of Medicine

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"The role of ethics in becoming a professional medical student"

Healthcare providers often joke that this rhetorical question is the golden rule of ethics: *Would this make my mother proud?*

This simple question seems adequate to judge a healthcare-related decision. However, modern medical ethics is much more complex, there may not and may never be correct choices or simple solutions.

The American Medical Association defines ethics as the guiding moral principles that medical professionals consult regarding patient-physician matters such as consent, communication, and decision-making. These values take-on two main roles for medical professionals and their patients: (1) to ensure patient safety and quality of care, and (2) to mediate management of controversial topics. Ethics serves a different role for medical students and is much less discussed. However, this does not make it obsolete for medical students. The role of ethics is to guide the development of professional behavior. Here, we will explore and discuss the medical student's role, responsibilities, and goals in medicine and ethics.

What is the medical student's role?

A physician's role is (1) to help all patients become and remain healthy, (2) to educate the patient so they can make informed choices and take action to benefit their health more independently, and (3) to frequently monitor and treat patients for health alteration, concerns, and risks. Unfortunately, medical students represent a lower rung on the professional ladder of healthcare. They carry less responsibility in providing healthcare and treatment to patients. However, their status as students does not limit them from learning skills necessary for patient-physician matters. A medical student should master the basic knowledge of human anatomy and physiology while in medical school, but this is just the minimum. Students must constantly be evaluating their goal and purpose in a medical career because although it is a profession, being a physician is also a calling with a series of difficult trials and tribulations.

What responsibility does a medical student have towards medicine and ethics?

One responsibility of a medical student is to define and understand the most common concern and goal in medicine, "health" and "unhealth". At the 1994 *Spirituality and Healing* conference in Louisville, Kentucky, Wendell Berry defined health as unconscious wholeness. In other words, health is a state of ignorance

where we are able to carry out our daily lives and activities without hindrance. *Unhealth* is the state where suddenly we become consciously aware of our health status because of discomfort caused by illness and physical abnormalities. Medical students should share the responsibility with physicians to educate patients that health is not just about conscious disease, but also daily wellness. Informed patients can decrease prognosis severity if they consciously monitor their health for potential risks and seek medical professionals for early intervention and treatment.

Another responsibility is to recognize the importance and role of the patient. In the article *Regarding the End of Medicine and the Pursuit of Health*, Leon Kass wrote that “health, in different ways, is everyone’s business,” and, “We are in an important way responsible for our own state of health”. Kass initially referred to our irresponsible behavior causing illness upon ourselves. This quote also encourages patients to take control and responsibility over their own health through ethics. A patient’s voice should have the highest priority in healthcare decision-making. Ethics decentralize policy making, making moral standards patient-centered and preventing physicians from abusing their privilege. Ethics is a form of empowerment to patients that enables them to advocate for their health and access optimal treatment.

Lastly, medical students should be cognizant of the risks patients experience while receiving medical care. The patient’s health is vulnerable and is constantly being jeopardized while in the management of a healthcare provider. Additionally, patient privacy can be readily violated every time the patient steps into an examination room or operating theater. Despite these seemingly drastic risks, patients can rest assured that medical ethics will protect them. Medical students can also rest assured that the same principles, such as non-maleficence and confidentiality, will ensure a long-lived career. As long as the outlined moral principles are followed if not internalized, ethics will enforce that physicians provide acceptable care and security of personal and sensitive information.

How can medical students utilize ethics to benefit their future practice?

The role of ethics in becoming a professional medical student is to influence behavior. The following motivational quote hints at how medical students can use ethics to affect their career as a physician:

*Watch your thoughts, they become words.
Watch your words, they become actions.
Watch your actions, they become habits.
Watch your habits, they become character.
Watch your character, for it becomes your destiny.*

This is not implying that students should repeat thoughts of patient-centered care while idly awaiting graduation and residency match. Medical students should aim to develop a moral compass alongside their studies. In addition, students should

internalize these moral principles and translate them into actions while participating in the medical community.

Ethics is constructed by our collective social experiences with family, community, religion, and spirituality. In other words, everyone has already begun developing ethical and professional behavior since they first interacted with their parents and/or guardians. We would be punished for inappropriate behavior and be told to seek redemption from our wrongdoing. Children learn to ask themselves “would this make my mother proud?” before acting mischievously. This rhetorical question established ethical standards to guide children’s actions, habits, and character. Medical students similarly should reflect on their past social experiences and use those learned values as a base to build-up a professional moral compass.

Most physicians have recited the Hippocratic oath, but this alone cannot ensure that a medical student will internalize and apply the moral principles to behave professionally. First-hand experience and implementation are needed to develop the oath’s words into actions, habits, and character. Skills for clinical excellence, such as bedside manners, are the best opportunity to reinforce ethics. Unfortunately, medical education has not yet formally integrated bedside manners into the curriculum. Traditionally, younger generations of physicians inherit their clinical skills through the “hidden curriculum”, or informal mentorship and observing senior clinicians. Medical students are limited in terms of hands-on clinical experience, so it is important that they seek all opportunities to observe patient-physician communication. Informal observership is a particularly effective opportunity because the student has no obligation but to observe.

Medical students would benefit most from diversity in experience: observing a wide range of practicing physicians with varying forms and styles of communication. Verbal and non-verbal communications heavily influence patient-physician dynamics in a clinic. Control over verbal syntax, tone, and diction can easily affect a patient’s ability to understand and willingness to comply with your recommendations. Appropriate hand movement or gestures of courtesy help to draw a personable connection to the patient, eliminating an overbearing, paternalistic presence that may be associated with physicians. Medical students can experiment with the different styles of verbal and non-verbal communication and should practice their preferred style in any social setting.

Personal Remarks

As a matriculating medical student, I believe that medical ethics takes high priority for all medical students, staff, and faculty at Trinity School of Medicine. St. Vincent and the Grenadines currently can be categorized in between Stage 2 and 3 of development, where modern medicine has been introduced and public awareness of health and contraception has not fully matured. Unlike other medical school students, Trinity students have a tremendous opportunity to take on a huge community role by actively advocating for public health awareness. Teaching

independent health management skills and methods to reduce potential risks will benefit countless Vincentians and help the country further develop. This is a unique and important opportunity for students to assist patients and understand their future-role as physicians.

The public often glorifies physicians as having an elite, intellectual, prestigious, stable, and well-paying profession. I perceive it differently: as an honorable, noble, and privileged profession. I found it to be the only profession where a single individual is entrusted with complete and detailed personal, family, and medical histories of countless patients in order to formulate the best treatment plans for each patient. The public places insurmountable faith in physicians, and ethics reassures the public that can continue to trust medical professionals.

I hope to end with a few thoughts for my fellow classmates and myself:

- 1) Ethics takes into account worldviews from various communities and religions. Physicians do not need to accept all worldviews and values, but they should have an open-mind to understand and consider all patients' opinion.
- 2) Ethics aims to prioritize and protect patients. Remember to always treat the patient, not the diagnosis.
- 3) Health was defined as unconscious wholeness. Physicians should advocate for patients to adapt a more modern definition of health and to be consciously aware and monitoring their wellness alongside disease.
- 4) A physician cannot do everything for the patient. Although, empowering patients, their families and caregivers can mean everything to the patients, their health and prognosis. Educate the patients, their families and caregivers so that they can more independently manage their health.