

# MEDICAL SCHOOL HOTLINE

## The Many Ways Physicians Care for Patients

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*In 1993, the Medical School Hotline was founded by Satoru Izutsu PhD (former vice-dean UH JABSOM), it is a monthly column from the University of Hawai'i John A. Burns School of Medicine and is edited by Kathleen Kihmm Connolly PhD; HJMPH Contributing Editor.*

Honored Guests, Faculty Members, Alumni, Family, Friends, and of course, Students of the John A. Burns School of Medicine, or JABSOM Class of 2022—a heartfelt congratulations to all of you on your acceptance to JABSOM!

I am deeply honored to be speaking to you this evening, and deeply honored to be the 2018 Leonard Tow Humanism in Medicine Awardee. And as a pathologist, I am especially honored and pleased because we pathologists are not particularly known for our bedside manner; or for interactions with patients at all, for that matter. In fact, there are a number of long-held stereotypes about pathologists that aren't particularly flattering—that we are socially awkward “Sheldon Cooper” types, and that we just hole ourselves up in our offices every day and look under the microscope. But I believe these stereotypes to be outdated and untrue—well, except for the fact that we do really love looking at stuff under the microscope. Also, most of my pathologist colleagues do have direct contact with patients—and to clarify, I am referring to living patients. But what this honor means to me, and what I hope to highlight to you incoming first-year medical students in this speech, is that there are many ways to express your care and compassion for patients: through your direct communication with them, and through a variety of other direct and indirect ways; and you student doctors will be involved in every one of them during your training at JABSOM and beyond.

First of all, what is humanism, in the traditional sense? Dr. Carol Cho of the University of Pennsylvania wrote a piece for the Gold Humanism Honor Society Newsroom<sup>1</sup> that lists the habits of highly humanistic physicians and describes a humanistic approach to patients as one that is sensitive to cultural backgrounds, values, and preferences of the patient. In attitude, they: “approach patients with humility and real curiosity about their lives, especially toward those patients whom it may seem difficult to relate.” They “treat their patients as they themselves would want to be treated,” and “see their role as not merely taking care of the medical aspect of their patients but also helping their patients through life struggles.” She states that habits of humanistic physicians include “ongoing and active self-reflection.” JABSOM students are known for these traits, and thus, I have no doubt that all of you on this stage will be compassionate toward your patients and good listeners to their medical as well as non-medical concerns.

There are many indirect ways that healers compassionately care for patients. I will begin by highlighting those who work behind the scenes. Pathologists, for example (I couldn't help mentioning my own specialty) although we usually do not meet the patients who we care for, are acutely aware that every blood sample, gastrointestinal biopsy, and surgical resection specimen that we analyze represents a patient, and that whatever diagnosis we render can and will impact that patient's life in significant and often permanent ways. Communication with our clinician colleagues regarding the patient's clinical picture is essential to a pathologist in arriving at an accurate and meaningful diagnosis, and in suggesting the appropriate tests to order. So students, please seek us out so that we can help care for your patients together. Pathologists are easy to find: we are typically located in the hospital basement. Another example of healers who work behind the scenes is our dedicated medical research faculty colleagues whose compassionate and meticulous life's work results in the exciting discoveries that form the basis of our diagnostic and treatment abilities.

A second indirect way that physicians compassionately care for patients is through leadership. Physicians are leaders who support and steer their medical teams. Humanism toward your teammates, colleagues, other medical professionals, and hospital staff ensure that they will remain enthused, motivated, and equipped to do their job well in a positive environment. This translates to excellent patient care. All of you students will experience leadership responsibilities at all levels throughout your careers as students, residents, and attending physicians. Observe and learn from the leaders around you which traits you wish to emulate, and which you don't as you rise through the leadership ranks and inspire your own teams.

Thirdly, the education of future physicians – both teaching and administering medical education – although technically an indirect means to compassionately care for patients, seems to me to be a direct one. Everyone from the Office of Medical Education, Office of Student Affairs, the Dean's Office, as well as tutors, clinical preceptors, and facilitators show their care for patients by ensuring that you are superbly educated and trained in all aspects of medicine: biological, clinical, as well as in professionalism. So students, since it equates to superb patient care, your medical training will necessarily be very rigorous. Know that you will not embark upon this journey

alone, because of the last way that I will highlight to indirectly show compassion toward patients; through mentorship.

I greatly respect those who seek the wisdom of mentors. So much so, that as an interviewer of JABSOM medical school applicants, a question that I would always ask the applicants was, “tell me about a mentor of yours, and how this person impacted your life.” In most cases, the applicant would light up and tell me about a parent or other relative, a teacher, a coach, a research mentor, or family physician. Several applicants were overwhelmed by the number of mentors in their life, and didn’t know where to begin in selecting one to highlight. I was pleased with all of these responses; because what it told me about these applicants was that they respected the wisdom of others, that they were eager to learn, and that they recognized that they needed guidance and advice from someone more experienced. In my opinion, this type of self-awareness is critical in the ability to provide excellent care to patients. So, Students of the Class of 2022, seek out mentors here at JABSOM. There are numerous excellent candidates right here in this room and seated next to me, wearing white coats. Medicine is a family, and like a family member, the mentors you choose will stand by you and support you throughout your careers, just like my wonderful mentors in medicine continue to do for me. And over the years I have come to realize that the best gift a student can give to a mentor is to become a mentor themselves.

In the daunting journey that lies ahead of you students in your quest to become healers in whatever direct or indirect ways you choose to heal, there will be many times of great joy and excitement, and there will also be many challenges. Know that you will not be traveling this road alone; because in addition to the support that your family and friends and fellow students will provide for you, your future JABSOM mentors, leaders, and teachers, many of whom are in this room tonight, will be there for you every step of the way—both during and beyond medical school. Congratulations and welcome to the JABSOM *O’hana*.

*Dr. Karen Thompson is a professor and chair of the Department of Pathology at the University of Hawai’i John A. Burns School of Medicine. This presentation was given upon her receipt of the 2018 Leonard Tow Humanism in Medicine Award, of the Arnold P. Gold Foundation, White Coat Ceremony, Honolulu, Hawai’i, 20 July 2018.*

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#### Reference

1. Chou CM. What are the habits of highly humanistic physicians? Gold Foundation News Room Website. <http://www.gold-foundation.org/what-are-the-habits-of-highly-humanistic-physicians/>. July 31, 2014. Accessed July 26, 2018.