

Science without the Art Isn't Good Enough

I had the great honor of being invited to attend the white coat ceremony of a young man whom we have grown to adore. I found the entire event to be highly emotional. Seeing these future physicians getting their “white coats,” embroidered with the medical school’s name on one side and their first and last names on the other, was awesome. Hearing the boisterous cheering of family members and friends when names were read and jackets placed on their student, was energizing and joyful. But I don’t think it was any of those things that made me cry.

Perhaps my tears started because my father, whom I miss so terribly, was a surgeon—and I imagined him going through a similar process (even though they didn’t have white coat ceremonies back then). Maybe it was seeing so many women and students of color in the medical school class. Or watching the face of this young man’s mother, so proud, so full of love.

I think, in hindsight, the tipping point for my tears came when the Vice-Chancellor spoke. He spoke for under 10 minutes, but it had a profound impact on me—and everyone else, I am sure.

He had a very warm, yet in-command demeanor. It was clear he wanted the white coat recipients in his audience, not only to listen—but hear and internalize what he was saying. His eyes, his words, his tone conveyed that expectation. The



broader audience was equally riveted and hanging on to every word.

He opened by offering the expected, yet none-the-less appreciated remarks.... *Congratulations, you’ve all worked so hard to get to this place, we are so proud of you, this is an important milestone on your journey....*

And then he went in an unexpected direction, and I could no longer hold back my tears. He spoke about how learning the science of medicine is important and part of what they go to medical school for, but it pales in importance to the other things that will make them great doctors.

He went on to say it was the earned trust of a patient, the honor of being invited into a vulnerable space of a patient and his/her family’s lives, that is uniquely afforded to one’s physician—and how the privilege and honor that

comes with wearing that white coat, should never be taken for granted.

He emphasized that great medicine is more art than science... and understanding that was critical for them to internalize and demonstrate. He emphasized their institution's commitment to instill the "art" side as well as the science—and their mastery of both sides—and ability to put them into practice would be what determines their success as physicians.

Wow. He really said it. He said what all of us experience every time we go to the doctor or the hospital. We assume physicians are trained to treat or cure us—but when we encounter ones who actively listen and care, who spend the time with us, who treat us as whole persons and not just ailments, we are impacted by that and are deeply grateful.

As I replayed his remarks in my head this past week, I was struck by their applicability to nearly every profession... and how important it is that we all name and demonstrate our deep understanding that what takes people from "good to great"—is more their "how" than their "what." It's the art, not just "the science" that determines success. The discretionary effort exhibited as people practice their craft... a caring touch... active listening.... consideration beyond what is expected, or what is the bare minimum... that is what makes someone outstanding at what they do.

We need to name this fact more often as we develop talent—those early in their careers—and those more senior.

Discretionary effort matters. It's noticed. It impacts who gets promotions, awards, and who is successful in life. We need to talk about it more and help those we work alongside and those we are accountable for developing, achieve a higher level of competency than they would otherwise achieve by just being good at what they do.

Yes. The science matters. A lot. It is positively necessary... but it isn't sufficient.

Ever.

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