

# White Coat Ceremony

## To Be a Physician

DANIEL W. FOSTER, M.D.

WHAT WE DO HERE TODAY IS SYMBOLIC. It is not of substance. It is symbol. Symbols, as philosophers understand them, have two characteristics. They are true and they point beyond themselves to that for which they stand. The symbol today is the white coat of the physician. What it points to is physicianhood, the goal of every student here, even though years away. I won't comment on the whiteness, except to say that in religious tradition white has always stood for goodness and purity. The symbol says that when I wear this coat, I cover myself and my problems and focus with absolute sincerity and integrity on my duty to heal the sick.

Sir William Osler was considered the greatest physician of this century. In 1902 he gave an address (1) which he began by saying: "I wish to bring home to your hearts certain distinctive features of our profession." This day, at the beginning, I remind you of the four characteristics about which Osler spoke, the characteristics of the physician.

First, we have a noble ancestry. "No other profession can boast of the same unbroken continuity of methods and of ideals," Osler said. We may be justly proud of the long line of true physicians going back to Hippocrates, Maimonides, Galen and Aretaeus. Of course, there have been pirates in the system — there still are — but it is the long line that is true. You are called to join it.

---

The Donald W. Seldin Distinguished Chair in Internal Medicine and Chairman, Department of Internal Medicine, The University of Texas Southwestern Medical School, Dallas, TX.

Address correspondence to Daniel W. Foster, M.D., Chairman, Department of Internal Medicine, The University of Texas Southwestern Medical School, 5323 Harry Hines Blvd., Dallas, TX 75235-9030.

Presented at the White Coat Ceremony of the Mount Sinai School of Medicine on September 8, 1999.

**Key Words:** White Coat Ceremony, Osler, Lister, Maimonides.

Second, we have a remarkable solidarity. We are men and women of all races and creeds, but one solidarity. Our solidarity is "to wrest from nature the secrets which have perplexed philosophers in all ages, to track to their sources the causes of disease, to correlate the vast stores of knowledge, that they may be quickly available for the prevention and cure of disease — these are our ambitions," he said.

Third, we have a progressive character. We change and change constantly as science brings new information to bear. A corollary of that is that a physician is a life[-long] student. We understand that medical education is not an event, but a process. Osler: "In the unloading of old formulae and in the substitution of the scientific spirit of free enquiry for cast-iron dogmas, we see promise of still greater achievement and a more glorious future." You must be life students. As a personal testimony, I study more now than I did in medical school. And that is not a burden. It is a joy.

Fourth, we have a singular benevolence. True physicians are not only competent and knowledgeable, they are kind. Osler said that medicine has reduced the average sum of human suffering "in a way to make the angels rejoice."

These, then, are the characteristics of true physicians: to keep the noble heritage, to fight disease, to be constantly progressive, to remain always benevolent. They should become your goal this day. The great Lister, discoverer of antiseptis, summarized the profession this way in a graduation address (2) at Edinburgh: "It is our proud office to attend the fleshly tabernacle of the immortal spirit, and our path, if rightly followed, will be guided by truth unfettered and love unfeigned. In this noble and holy calling," he said, "I wish you all Godspeed."

We don't talk that way today, but what he is saying is that this is a pretty nifty profession: to

seek truth in disinterested fashion, which is our science, and to practice unfaked love, which we usually call compassion.

One other thing. This life is sometimes hard. You will have hard times in your studies. One is fairly often tired, both as a student and as a practitioner. It is hard also because we do not always win the battle against disease and have to participate in suffering and death. One of my best friends and colleagues on the faculty has a metastatic colon cancer. The outcome is uncertain, but I think it will be easier for him because I will accompany him on the journey. And that will be a privilege. A hard privilege, but a privilege. That's okay, because it has always been hard for the long line about which I have spoken and which I hope you will join.

I thought I might illustrate the hardness and the willingness to bear it with an eloquent essay written by Prad Ramamirtham, a recent graduate of our residency program. He gave it to me shortly before he left. He titled it, "*Why I go up on the roof.*"

Swimming day in day out in the murky depths of human despair can leave one despondent. It raises daily, sometimes hourly, the age-old question — Why? Such is the life of a resident in a busy county hospital. Bearing witness to the folly of Pandora's curiosity, watching disease slither in its naked form with the stench of misery filling every crevice of the Emergency Room can leave a doctor's heart numb, his hands cold, his head calculating. We seek refuge in the sanctuary of Science; in the disease process. Through timeless practice we have become experts at separating a patient from his illness. Rule him out. Tube him. Culture her up and start broad spectrums. She needs spun<sup>1</sup>. We have some Motrin for you, sir. So I tread calmly for hours as this social genocide gathers at our hospital doors — a holocaust of the poor and indigent — until finally, I, too, am affected.

It is at these times that I make my pilgrimage up the north elevators to the tenth floor. Clambering up the final few stairwells, I carefully push [open] the metal door to let the final streaks of daylight flicker on the dimly lit steps. Stepping out onto the roof I am greeted by the western apricot sky with its hues of green and blue and orange and red. Airplanes gently rise from the nearby airport,

offering the soft silhouette of their underbellies as they turn to chase the last light of the sun. To the east the nightcalls begin from downtown Dallas, with the glass and concrete walls of the city giving testimony to man's ascension to power. After a few silent moments I can feel the vibes of the city. The collective vibe from every little household, each with its own pain and glory. I open up and let it seep into every pore, and slowly again I feel a part of humanity. This is why I go up on the roof.

My beeper goes off, and so I leave the green glow of the Heritage Building and the glittering ball of Reunion Tower guarding the chasm of Interstate 35 and return to the E.R. to see my next admission. It's a 35-year-old white man with a CD4 count of nothing. He's got a fever, he looks scared, he looks sick. I take a deep breath and in a few seconds my heart starts to soften, my hands warm, my head's still ticking away at a million miles an hour. An invisible tear wells up in the corner of my eye as I begin, "It's going to be okay, sir. What brought you to the hospital today?"

Well, what I have tried to say is that this white coat is a symbol of that which I hope you will be — a true physician. You can mess it up. You can throw it away. You can even become a pirate. But don't. You will miss out on something great if you do. Something noble, Osler said.

I mentioned earlier the name of Moses Maimonides, the great Jewish theologian/physician of the 12th century. There is a prayer that is attributed to him. Like many ancient documents, there are some who believe that he did not actually write it (3). But that does not matter. What matters is the message therein. The same message as Osler's. The message of Prad Ramamirtham. The message is that it is a noble profession, that there is a need for perpetual study, that the demands for mercy and compassion are constant and uncompromisable. This is the prayer:

I begin once more my daily work. Be thou with me, Almighty, Father of Mercy, in all my efforts to heal the sick. For without thee, man is but a helpless creature. Grant that I may be filled with love for my art and for my fellow man. May the thirst for gain and the desire for fame be from my heart. For these are the enemies of Pity and the ministers of Hate.

<sup>1</sup>Resident shorthand for an hematocrit.

Grant that I may be able to devote myself body and soul to the children who suffer from pain.

Preserve my strength, that I may be able to restore the strength of the rich and the poor, the good and the bad, the friend and the foe. Let me see in the sufferer the man alone. When wiser men teach me, let me be humble to learn; for the mind of man is so puny, and the art of healing is so vast. But when fools are ready to advise me or find fault with me, let me not listen to their folly. Let me be intent upon one thing, O Father of Mercy, to be always merciful to thy suffering children.

May there never arise in me the notion that I know enough, but give me strength and leisure and zeal to enlarge my knowledge. Our work is great, and the mind of man presses forward forever. Thou has chosen me

in thy grace, to watch over the life and death of thy creatures. I am about to fulfill my duties. Guide me in this immense work so that it may be of avail.

I find that prayer beautiful. I hope you do too. I will not be here to watch or participate in your education. I know it will be safe, because I know and trust the leadership of your school. As a consequence I will leave with the same single word used by Lister at Edinburgh: Godspeed.

#### References

1. Osler W. Chauvinism in medicine. *The Philadelphia Medical Journal* 1902; 10:432–439.
2. Coope R. The quiet art. A doctor's anthology. Edinburgh & London: F & S Livingstone; 1952. p. 25.
3. Rosner F. The physician's prayer attributed to Moses Maimonides. *Bull Hist Med* 1967; 41:440–454. The author of the English version cited here is unknown to me. There is another excellent English version, slightly different, in the Rosner paper.