Humanism’s Essential Role in Healthcare Reform

Jordan J. Cohen, M.D.
Professor of Medicine and Public Health
George Washington University

1st Annual Humanism in Medicine Grand Rounds

Florida State University
College of Medicine
March 22, 2012
Summary of today’s thesis

Healthcare reform is inevitable - with or without ACA

The “reforms” required are fundamental, system-wide transformations

The needed transformations entail major paradigm shifts for doctors

Result: doctors will have myriad opportunities for unprofessional behavior

To maintain trust, doctors must adhere to the tenets of professionalism

Sustaining professionalism’s ethical tenets (esp. now and in the future!) requires a deeply rooted predisposition to humanism
Healthcare Reform’s Inevitability

Moral (and economic) imperative to expand health insurance

Unsustainable cost escalation

Unacceptably poor value (quality ÷ cost) for the dollars spent

Overuse, underuse and misuse of healthcare resources

Unconscionable disparities in health and healthcare
Transformations Required for True Healthcare Reform

Expanded access through “universal” insurance

Important caveats

- Millions will remain uninsured
- Vulnerable populations will remain at (?increased) risk
- Geographic maldistribution will not be solved
Transformations Required for True Healthcare Reform

Cost containment
- Replace fee-for-service with bundled or capitated payments
- Minimize “overuse”
  - Shared savings arrangements
  - Provide guidance for comparative effectiveness

Aggregate providers
- Team-based care
- Patient-centered home
- Integrated delivery systems
- Accountable Care Organization
Transformations Required for True Healthcare Reform

Accountability for costs and outcomes
  Measured performance
    esp. Patient satisfaction
Public reporting
  “Hospital Compare”
Guidelines
  e.g., Comparative effectiveness
Definition of Professionalism

Professionalism comprises the behaviors required of individual physicians in fulfilling the profession’s compact with society –

i.e., behaviors required to meet public expectations

Healthcare reform is redefining public expectations of physicians and, hence, requires a re-examination of professionalism
Traditional Principles Undergirding Professionalism

Primacy of patient welfare (Hippocrates)

Patient autonomy (The Enlightenment)
Charter on Medical Professionalism
Principles of Professionalism for the 21st Century

Primacy of patient welfare

Patient autonomy

Social justice
Charter on Medical Professionalism: Ten Categories of Responsibilities

1. Professional Competence
2. Honesty with Patients
3. Patient Confidentiality
4. Maintaining Appropriate Relations with Patients
5. Scientific Knowledge
6. Professional Responsibilities
7. Maintaining Trust by Managing Conflicts of Interest
8. Improving Quality of Care
9. Improving Access to Care
10. Just Distribution of Resources
New Expectations for Doctors Trigger Several Fundamental Paradigm Shifts

- Autonomy: Doctor decides → Accountability: Shared decision making
- Paternalistic: Individual needs → Accountability: Societal needs
- Profligate: Captain of the team → Teammate: Pay for performance
- Self employed: Fee for each service → System “employee”
The overarching challenge

Fulfilling these new expectations without abandoning a commitment to professionalism
Some of the Added Challenges to Professionalism

Upholding the primacy of patients’ interest
  - Avoiding underuse of needed services
  - Maintaining confidentiality, esp. with health IT
  - Managing conflicts of interest  
    e.g., Clinical judgments at variance with employer standards
  - Caring for vulnerable populations

Interprofessional relationships
  - Optimal team-based care requires a significant culture change

Improving the quality of healthcare
  - Embracing accountability
  - Enhancing patient satisfaction
So, where does humanism come in?
Professionalism is a way of acting

It comprises a set of observable behaviors

It can be measured and evaluated, which is a good thing

But, it can also be “skin deep”
Humanism is a way of being

It comprises a set of deep-seated personal convictions about one’s obligations to others, especially others in need.

(duty, integrity, altruism, compassion, empathy, caring)

Humanistic physicians are intuitively and strongly motivated to adhere to the traditional virtues and expectations of their calling.
Humanism’s Essential Role in Healthcare Reform

Humanism provides the passion needed to sustain one’s commitment to professionalism.

Humanistic physicians are best positioned to fulfill society's expectations despite the many new (and old!) temptations to do otherwise.

Hence, bolstering humanism is a first-order priority for sustaining professionalism while enduring the transformations inherent in healthcare reform.
How Can Educators Promote the Humanism/Professionalism Link?

1. Adopt appropriate admission criteria
2. Establish explicit learning objectives
3. Articulate institutional expectations
4. Formal curriculum: cognitive rationale for adhering to the precepts of professionalism
5. Informal curriculum: model behaviors emblematic of professionalism
6. Nurture, recognize and reward humanism
Enter the Arnold P. Gold Foundation for Humanism in Medicine

White Coat Ceremony  Essay Contest  Faculty & Student Projects
Student Clinician's Ceremony  Annual Lecture at AAMC  Symposia
Humanism Awards  Ethics Night
Traveling Fellows
Professorships
Gold Humanism Honor Society
Gold Humanism Honor Society

**Objective:**
To honor senior medical students, residents, and faculty as exemplars of humanistic patient care

**Mission:**
To reinforce humanistic attributes and thereby help to institutionalize the values of professionalism

**Vision:**
To create a cadre of institutional change agents who will advance and perpetuate a culture of caring
Professionalism and humanism are best considered not as separate attributes of a good doctor, but rather as intimately linked components of the virtuous physician.

Without a solid foundation of humanism to animate it, professionalism is overly dependent on good intentions and has little chance to prevail under the intense lure of self-interest rife in current, let alone future medical practice.

Bolstering humanism among students, residents and faculty is a core responsibility of medical educators.