Professionalism: Orientation Exercises for Incoming Osteopathic Medical Students and Developing Class Vision Statements

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The Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine has developed an exercise to introduce professional ethics and behavior at the earliest stages of medical education. During orientation, each incoming class creates a class vision statement. After small group discussions on professional ethics, honesty, and responsibilities, representatives from each group collated student input and constructed a class vision statement reflective of student consensus on these issues. Each vision statement was recited as an oath during the white coat ceremony at the conclusion of the orientation program. Despite the fact that previous vision statements were unavailable to each incoming class, there were many commonalities among the statements created.

Central elements of all vision statements include commitment to altruism, compassionate treatment of patients, and honesty and integrity in all professional interactions. Humility, the capacity to recognize and accept one’s limitations in knowledge and skills, was also a key element in each statement. Three of the four statements specifically recognized the teamwork and mutual respect that should be engendered among all members of the health care team. Each vision statement had prominent statements regarding the learning process during osteopathic medical school and acknowledged the importance of active and lifelong learning in the students’ career paths.

Student evaluation of this exercise has been positive, especially the recitation of the statement during the white coat ceremony. Results suggest that the development of a class vision statement represents a powerful mechanism for addressing the importance of professional attitudes, behaviors, and ethics at the earliest stages of medical education.

The Medical School Objectives Project has identified four attributes that physicians must demonstrate to be effective in the practice of medicine in the 21st century: altruism, skill, knowledge, and duty. Teaching the skills and knowledge required of a practicing physician is traditionally achieved through didactic courses in the first 2 years of medical school, the more clinically oriented clerkships in the final 2 years of medical school and during internship and residency training programs. However, instilling attributes such as duty and altruism, as well as developing professional behaviors and attitudes during medical training, poses a greater challenge to medical educators. Traditionally, these elements of the “hidden curriculum” are taught by the example of peers, residents, and attending physicians in the clinical setting.

To underscore the fundamental importance of these attributes for the development of a competent and caring physician, many institutions have incorporated exercises into the first-year medical curriculum that focus on these issues. Often, professional attitudes and behaviors are addressed in case-based small group discussions or other didactic exercises as part of medical ethics and clinical medicine courses. We and others have chosen to introduce these professional attitudes and behaviors as early as possible in medical training with the development of a class policy or vision statement during orientation that is recited during the white coat ceremony as a promise or oath.

Methods

Summer Reading Assignments

The classes of 2003 and 2004 were assigned readings focusing on professional issues to be completed during the summer preceding the first academic term. For the class of 2003, students were assigned articles by Selzer and Charon, Howell, Connelly, Novell, and Shelton. These readings focused on humanism, virtue, and mindfulness for physicians. For the class of 2004, the assigned readings by Branch, Minogue, Carson, and Swick focused on medical ethics and issues of professionalism. The classes of 2005 and 2006 did not have assigned summer reading before matriculation.
Developing Class Vision Statements

At orientation, each class was instructed to develop a class policy or vision statement. These were described to the students as “promises” that they would make to themselves, their classmates, the faculty, and their future patients, as well as the other health care workers with whom they will interact as students or future physicians. They were also instructed that these promises were to focus on the type of medical students and future physicians the students would strive to become. Each class was presented the following question designed to help them collect their thoughts and frame their discussion:

“Imagine that you are now 68 years old and have had a long and productive career in osteopathic medicine. You are being given the Osteopathic Physician of the Year Award. Speaking about you at the awards dinner will be your professors at Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine (PCOM), your classmates from PCOM, and several of your patients, as well as a number of physician colleagues. Having the benefit of knowing this in advance, what promises will you make now to your classmates, your teachers here at PCOM, your future patients, your physician colleagues, and other health care professionals with whom you will interact to ensure that you richly deserve this award?”

Presentation of the question was followed by suggestions to help the groups focus their discussions. Suggested areas of discussion included ethics and honesty between classmates and with faculty, responsibilities to patients and their “stories,” cultural diversity, and impact of medical economics, medical ethics, and privacy issues on the practice of medicine. Finally, each class was asked to think of promises that they would make to their families and loved ones, their community, and to themselves.

Involved faculty members were available to the students as facilitators and advisors. It is interesting to note that students chose not to seek faculty advice at this phase of the process. Each class was divided into 20 groups of approximately 12 students who discussed their thoughts over lunch. The appointment of a “scribe” was suggested to collate each group’s thoughts. Groups were instructed to formulate statements that reflected the group’s consensus and to appoint a representative.

Representatives from each group met with key faculty members for dinner that evening or breakfast the next morning. The thoughts from each group were coalesced into a class vision statement at this meeting. The representatives’ summaries were entered via computer onto an overhead projection system so that each representative could see the document as it was being constructed. When the final version had been prepared, the student representatives reported back to the class as a whole about the process, the themes that emerged during the discussions, etc. The class vision statement was then read by the class, led by the dean of the college, as an oath before the white coat ceremony.

Results and Discussion

The vision statements created by the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine classes of 2003, 2004, 2005, and 2006 are shown in Figures 1 through 4, respectively. As a result of our initial experience with construction of a class vision statement, we made slight modifications to the process during the next 3 years. For example, the vision statement created by the class of 2003 (the first class to experience this exercise) was the longest. This was due to our desire to let all the voices that emerged be heard and a reluctance to “edit” students’ thoughts. However, because of its length, the vision statement created by this class was cumbersome when read by the class during the white coat ceremony. As a result, during the construction of vision statements by representatives of subsequent classes, we suggested that students be mindful of the final statement length, to be concise, and to avoid redundancy. Subsequent statements prepared by the classes of 2004, 2005, and 2006 were shorter.

Construction of the entire statement by all 20 class representatives also proved to be cumbersome. Therefore, for construction of the vision statements for the classes of 2005 and 2006, the class representatives met initially and collated each group’s summary. During these preliminary discussions, several recurring themes were identified. Once these themes were established, the group was divided into subcommittees to craft the portion of the statement corresponding to that theme. This theme-based organization of the vision statement is particularly evident in the statement constructed by the class of 2006, which was organized around attributes that the class sought to embody. Statements made by previous classes were organized around promises made to particular groups (eg, themselves, patients, faculty) as is typified by the vision statement created by the class of 2003.

Despite the fact that previous vision statements were intentionally not made available to each incoming class, there were many commonalities among the four statements created thus far. Altruism, one of the attributes identified by the Medical School Objectives Project as necessary to meet society’s expectations of physicians, was a common theme. A commitment to the empathetic and compassionate treatment of patients was also a central element. Respect for the privacy and/or dignity of patients was explicitly promised in three statements. The need for honesty and integrity in all interactions was an integral part of each vision statement, as was humility, the capacity to recognize and accept one’s limitations in knowledge and skills. Three statements recognized the teamwork and mutual respect that should be engendered among all members of the health care team.

All vision statements had prominent statements regarding the learning process during medical school and acknowledged the importance of active and lifelong learning in their chosen career paths. For example, the class of 2003 promised to “take responsibility for our education” and to “be active learners.”
Class of 2003 Vision Statement

We the members of the Class of 2003 at Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine dedicate ourselves to the following goals for our patients, our colleagues, our college, our families, and our community.

For our patients:
- We will listen to our patients, we will take time with them and learn from them. As physicians, we must empty our cup and let our patients fill it.
- We will treat patients as people first, not just as diseases.
- We will recognize that our patients look to us as educators and guides—it is our responsibility to treat them with honesty and pursue giving them a healthy life through love.
- We will be patient advocates and be mindful that the patient may have no other.
- We will empower patients to make their own choices, involve them in their treatment, and guide them in terms that they can understand.
- We will strive to know patients’ lives, their work, and their families.
- We will respect their religious beliefs, culture, and lifestyle—to set aside our preconceptions and approach each patient as a clean slate.
- We will always remember that our patients look to us to be confident, empathetic, caring, and reassuring and to represent to them a warm element in a cold world.
- We will never let economics lessen our relationship with or compromise our care for our patients.
- We will learn to be comfortable with death, know that we cannot always cure, and be mindful about quality of life of our patients.
- We will always remember that we were patients before we were doctors.

For our colleagues:
- We will recognize that differences of opinion are not statements of right and wrong.
- We will compete in order to learn—not to elevate ourselves; in competing, we will challenge each other to be better physicians.
- We will show that we care about each other by supporting each other.
- We will respect diversity among our colleagues and use it positively—we will share our strengths.
- We will recognize that no one’s experience is the same, but all may be valuable.
- We will regard being a physician as a privilege.

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Class of 2003 Vision Statement (continued)

We will recognize our role as each other’s teachers.
We will strive to maintain a positive attitude.
We will seek to establish a positive and invigorating working environment for all on the health care team.
We will always be mindful that our actions reflect upon our college, our colleagues, and our profession.

For our college and faculty:
We will be mindful that our faculty today will be our colleagues tomorrow.
We will regard our faculty as the foundation of our knowledge base but will also take responsibility for our education.
We will be active learners and will be prepared for the lessons that our faculty will offer to us.
We will challenge our faculty to remain at the forefront of their fields.
We will regard all staff in the college as part of our education and will respect them as such.
We will seek to establish personal learning relationships with our faculty.
We will always be honest with our teachers

For our profession:
We will appreciate and utilize the talents of all members of the health care team.
We will strive to attain a level of competence in the science and art of medicine in order for our colleagues to confidently rely upon us.
We will let our ethics guide our professional relationships.
We will recognize that we are role models for our community.
Although we must accept responsibility as leader and one responsible for making decisions, we will recognize that other members of the health care team do not work for us—we all work for the patient.
We will never let our pride blind us to our weaknesses.
We will be receptive to learning about all means of helping patients.
We will recognize that physicians must continue to learn as perpetual students.
We will understand the health care system and will collaborate with colleagues to make it work better for patients.

(continued on page 255)
Class of 2003 Vision Statement (continued)

As osteopathic physicians:
- We will recognize our role as ambassadors of osteopathic medicine.
- We will promote the profession by being at the cutting edge of technology while remaining patient-centered.

For our families and ourselves:
- We will not neglect our responsibilities to our loved ones.
- We will recognize that we have a family role as well as a professional role—we will give our best to both roles.
- We will look to our families for emotional support and appreciate the sacrifices that they are making for us.
- We will always remind our families that we love and need them, and we will keep them involved in our lives and communicate with them openly.
- We will be truthful to ourselves and to each other. Academic honesty will be an implicit part of our values, not just the school’s policy.
- We will strive for personal awareness and to manage our emotions and stresses.
- We will remain grounded.
- We will know our own limits.
- We will maintain a balance between our physical, emotional, spiritual, and social well-being.
- We will strive for self-improvement.
- We will never lose sight of our love for medicine, the reason that we became doctors.

Last, we promise to abide by our ideals.

The class of 2004 promised to “establish a partnership for learning with our teachers based on mutual respect, responsibility, and understanding.” The class of 2005 committed to “strive to reflect [faculty’s] commitment to teaching through our commitment to learning. We promise to be lifelong learners.” The class of 2006 vision statement promised to “give our all to our faculty, as the beneficiaries of their knowledge and willingness to lead us.”

A surprising common thread in our class vision statements was a commitment to balance personal/family and professional responsibilities. The class of 2003 vowed to “maintain a balance between our physical, emotional, spiritual, and social well-being.” The class of 2005 stated, “We owe it to ourselves and those around us to maintain a healthy mental, physical, and spiritual balance in our lives.” The vision statement for the class of 2006 promised to “...remember the support our family and friends lend to our achievements. If we respect all of these aspects during our education and professional careers, we will maintain a precious balance in and perspective on life.”

Students from the class of 2003 were asked to evaluate the exercise following completion of the orientation program. On
Class of 2004 Vision Statement

We the members of the Class of 2004, in order to formulate a vision for this class, have made a commitment to the following abiding principles:

To our profession
We commit ourselves to a lifelong pursuit of learning and the formation of the basic science foundation crucial to our success. Understanding these principles is vital to assimilating the technological advances of modern medicine with our core knowledge. As osteopathic physicians, we must understand the physiology of the human body and stand in awe of the human spirit.

It is our charge to foster creative thought and appreciate exactly what separates this profession from all else—the singular ability to see the human spirit in all its naked splendor.

It is by embracing this osteopathic philosophy that we will truly become healers.

To our community
We will strive to continue the tradition of welcoming and supporting students, thereby ensuring the success of both the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine and our peers. The class will establish a partnership for learning with our teachers based on mutual respect, responsibility, and understanding. We will embrace our learning with the foresight that we will assume the role of mentor to the next generation of physicians. Furthermore, we will work together with each other and members of other health professions to accentuate each other’s strengths. It is our promise to respect all members of our community and to be advocates of their right to quality health care. We will take an active role in the policy-making that affects our profession and our patients, regardless of their socioeconomic status. Finally, we will treat our patients and peers as part of our family.

To our patients
We will honor our patients by remembering that they are people, not diseases. We will never be below them or above them, but always beside them. We will maintain our compassion by taking extra time to communicate, listen, and earn their trust. As patient advocates, we will honor our responsibility to include our patients in their own healing process, through education and by respecting their decisions. We vow to be role models and will strive to continue to empathize with our patients throughout our careers.

To ourselves
We commit to not lose ourselves in the title of “physician”—for we are humans first and physicians second. By recognizing our own limitations and by being honest with ourselves we will ensure that we will never do less than all that we are capable of doing. We will continually strive to improve our knowledge and skills by learning from all possible resources. We shall not fear to draw upon our own personal experiences and feelings in dealing with the suffering of others. By keeping in mind our responsibility to understand and apply ethics in our actions and decisions, we shall find the courage to abide by our beliefs in the face of adversity.

And above all else—integrity.

Figure 2. Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine Class of 2004 vision statement.
Class of 2005 Vision Statement

As we take this next step on our journey, we the Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine Class of 2005 pledge as future osteopathic physicians to abide by the following:

We will plant the seeds of long-term personal and professional relationships that will flourish over a lifetime. We will compete against ourselves and not against one another while maintaining the highest standards of integrity. We will use our talents to help each other reach our goals, yet remain humble in doing so. We shall strive to understand each other’s diverse backgrounds and celebrate these differences.

To those who teach us, we will strive to reflect their commitment to teaching through our commitment to learning. We promise to be lifelong learners. We will honor them by doing our best while maintaining a high level of personal integrity and academic honesty—and will apply their teachings ethically throughout our professional lives. We will value criticism as constructive parts of our learning. We pledge to respect them as our mentors, colleagues, and friends. We ask them to continually challenge us, remembering that we are the fruits of their efforts as well as our own.

To our patients, we will show passion for our field, realizing that our patients’ welfare is our reward. Our role as patient advocates must supersede all legal and economic obstacles. We will maintain an open mind while striving to understand our patients’ traditions, communities, and cultures. We will effectively communicate with our patients and will strive to establish the precious bond of empathy. We will be active partners in each patient’s search for health and wellness. We will respect patient confidentiality and do all to preserve the sanctity and dignity of the physician-patient relationship. We will acknowledge our limitations and learn from our mistakes. We will recognize that our patients provide us with the means to fulfill our dreams as physicians.

We owe it to ourselves and those around us to maintain a healthy mental, physical, and spiritual balance in our lives. As role models, we will embody the highest of ethical standards and will demand the same of others, while humbly recognizing our limits without succumbing to them.

We will value those who made sacrifices for us and be proud of who we are because of their efforts, not just our own.

In our professional community, we will respect the expertise of our peers and look to them as sources of constructive criticism. We will recognize the value of each member of the health care team and will appreciate the role each one plays in the care of the patient while never forgetting the power of a simple “thank you.”

Figure 3. Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine Class of 2005 vision statement.
Class of 2006 Vision Statement

We the Class of 2006, enriched by our diversity and unified by our common commitment to the principles of osteopathic medicine, are humbled by the honor and privilege of practicing medicine. As future physicians, we pledge to ourselves, colleagues, families, and patients to embody the following tenets:

Integrity
Ours will be a community based on trust. We will uphold the highest personal standards and by our example we will encourage others to do the same. We will be a friend, a mentor, and a student in all situations. We will admit to our shortcomings and work together to overcome them.

Respect
Respect will engender a community focused on teamwork and cohesiveness. First and foremost, we must each know our limits, realizing that to be our best we must be ourselves. As classmates, we will respect each other for our knowledge and will make a commitment to learn as much as possible while maintaining a positive environment. We will give our all to our faculty, as the beneficiaries of their knowledge and willingness to lead us. We will respect each patient as an individual offering, a lesson to be learned. We will remember the support our families and friends lend to our achievements. If we respect all of these aspects during our education and professional careers, we will maintain a precious balance in and perspective on life.

Responsibility
It is our responsibility to set high expectations and to work with tenacity to meet them. As future physicians, we have the opportunity to understand, embrace, and educate others. As students, we will dedicate ourselves to our studies, avail ourselves of all resources afforded to us, and welcome the challenges presented to us by the faculty.

We will fulfill a responsibility to ourselves by engaging in enriching activities and meaningful relationships in our personal and professional lives. As we acknowledge our responsibility to become the most educated and skillful physicians we can be, we will also remember to be students of life, continually sharing our knowledge, our experiences and our diverse views.

Humanity
We will celebrate our humanity by providing compassionate care to our community.

We will strive not only to understand our patients, but also to achieve true empathy with them.

With humility, we will embrace our vocation.

With thanks to those who have come before us, we will honor the osteopathic philosophy and tradition. In holding true to the osteopathic way of life, we hope to inspire those who will come after us. We the class of 2006 will thereby embrace these ideals. We will forge partnerships with our faculty and mentors to achieve these goals not only for ourselves, but also for our colleagues, our families, and most important, our patients.

Figure 4. Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine Class of 2006 vision statement.
a scale of 1 (worst) to 5 (best), students were asked to evaluate individual elements of the orientation program, including the development of the class vision statement. The value of creating a class vision statement was rated highly by responding students (average score, 4.51). The question that formed the springboard for discussion was also rated strongly (average score, 4.18). The white coat ceremony received positive marks from the students (average score, 4.7). As part of the ceremony, the presentation of the class vision statement also received high marks (average score, 4.32). Weak elements of the vision statement exercise included the faculty introduction of the assignment (average score, 3.86) and the representative student reports to the class regarding the construction of the statement (average score, 3.78).

The impact of these exercises on the development of professional behaviors over the continuum of undergraduate medical education remains speculative. For example, it is difficult to ascertain whether the promises relating to the empathetic treatment of patients made during recitation of the vision statement translated to more positive professional interactions with patients. Whether these exercises influenced student attitudes during their undergraduate medical education, internship, and residency training may be easier to address. We plan to assess whether the vision statement impacted the development of professional attitudes for all classes at the end of the 2003–2004 academic year by survey instrument. At this time, the class of 2006 will have completed the second didactic year and will be preparing for the Comprehensive Osteopathic Medical Licensing Examination (COMLEX–USA) Level 1 and the beginning of clinical rotations; the class of 2005 will have completed the first year of clinical rotations; the class of 2004 will be graduating; and the class of 2003 will be completing their internship year. This format will allow us to assess about 1000 students who have experienced the construction of a class vision statement during orientation at various later stages of training.

Conclusion
The Philadelphia College of Osteopathic Medicine has developed an exercise for incoming medical students to introduce professional ethics and behavior during the orientation process. Each incoming class creates a class vision statement that is recited as an oath during the white coat ceremony. Commonalities in the vision statements created thus far include commitment to altruism, compassion, honesty, and humility. Student evaluation of this exercise has been positive, especially the recitation of the statement during the white coat ceremony. Our results suggest that the development of a class vision statement represents a powerful mechanism of addressing the importance of professional attitudes, behaviors, and ethics at the earliest stages of medical education.

References