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Christopher J. Smiley DDS

Michigan Dental Association, csmiley@michigandental.org

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By Christopher J. Smiley, DDS
Editor-in-Chief

The Promise of the White Coat

Last year, I was honored to deliver the keynote address at Marquette University School of Dentistry's White Coat ceremony. There were no such occasions when my wife and I entered dental school, so I wanted to learn more before I stood before these future colleagues to mark their transformation from ordinary students to ones studying to join a health profession.

I knew that these events had become a ritual and point of pride for family, friends, and faculty dating back to 1993, when Professor Arnold P. Gold, a pediatric neurologist at Columbia University School of Medicine, proposed the first white coat ceremony to emphasize the critical importance of humanism in health care. I learned that donning the white coat signifies a promise by the candidate to uphold the profession with compassion and the highest ethical standards. Those are lofty expectations for fluid-resistant clothing!

Dental education provides instruction in ethics, and I have participated in delivering the American College of Dentists' Ethical Dilemma Course to students at the University of Michigan. Yet, I remain skeptical that we can teach lasting ethical behavior. I'd like to believe that the solemnity of a white coat ceremony can instill an ongoing reminder to adhere to ethical principles every time a clinician slips on a white coat.

I recently learned that there was no ethical check or balance for a classmate sentenced to four-and-a-half years in federal prison for defrauding his patients. At his trial, dental plan administrators testified that he annually delivered between 500 to 700 crowns, placing him in the top 5% of solo practitioners in his state. Yet, it wasn't utilization review that brought him to justice, and it wasn't the threat of the millions of dollars he has lost in fines, lawsuits, and restitution. Nor was it the public humiliation he has created for himself and the profession from sensational news stories about the dentist who intentionally broke teeth and violated his patients' trust to place and bill for crowns. The reckoning for this criminal, unethical behavior occurred because the dentist

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who purchased his practice identified and reported this gross violation of the standard of care. Evidently, the ethics courses we took in dental school failed my classmate. So how does the profession instill lasting behavior?

In my address to the students, I challenged them to identify and hold on to their core values. I discussed how to create a values inventory, and that they should review it annually and consult it whenever they face an ethical dilemma.

Although scrubs and fluid-resistant gowns have replaced the white coat in practice, it is essential to remain faithful to its intent. Even those who never had a white coat ceremony should figuratively don a white coat as a daily reminder of our commitment to uphold the profession with compassion for our patients and the delivery of care with the highest ethical standards.

At the time, I thought the most rewarding part of providing the keynote was witnessing the smiles and enthusiasm of the students as they put on their white coats. I hope that the event will have a lasting impact on preserving their idealism, and that their white coat will squeeze tighter to remind them of the promises made if ever they are tempted to stray. ●

Photos from the White Coat ceremonies at both of our state's dental schools appear in this issue. Dr. Vince Benivegna, MDA president, spoke at this year's U-M White Coat ceremony. See Page 68.