

**White Coat Ceremony: Goodness and Greatness
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Let me start with a quote:

“Dental school will be one of the hardest times of your life,” a comment I have heard more times than I can count. I naively thought this would only entail intensive didactic courses and learning new hand skills. However, after entering clinic and taking the Ethics course, I realize there is a whole subset of patient interaction and ethical decision-making that I completely neglected to consider.

That passage is from one of the final ethics papers that second year students wrote in June. Here are a few more:

Entering the clinic at Pacific can be like walking into a crash course in life - it can be messy, lacking a clear black or white solution to every problem.

As a dental student, I am surprised by how many ethical situations I’ve already encountered during my short time in dental school.

Throughout my academic career, I have dealt with many ethical dilemmas that made me question my integrity and values. However, I have to say that I’ve gone through the most during dental school, whether it be in a classroom with my colleagues or in clinic with faculty and patients.

The definition of a moral dilemma is a situation in which no matter what action you choose, it will violate a normative principle. This is what I have been continuously presented with while treating this patient.

The dental clinic has no shortage of ethical and moral dilemmas. Between patients who are searching for the fastest and most affordable care, students who are trying to complete requirements, and a school that is trying to maintain its reputation, there are plenty of situations that can become morally questionable rather quickly.

As I progress through dental school, it becomes increasingly more clear how large of an impact ethics plays in the day-to-day life of a dentist.

And one more:

Dental school has been nothing short of moral and ethical dilemmas at what seems like every corner of a typical day in school.

Welcome to your White Coat Ceremony. It's a joy and an honor to speak at this very special event, and I feel lucky. Thank you for inviting me.

I want to speak with you about the coming year of dental and hygiene school and some of the challenges you are about to face. It often surprises students when they gradually realize how central ethics are to clinical practice. You, yourself, may understandably think that dentistry is mostly about getting that prep and those margins just right, and learning to do it fast. But, here's what one second year student wrote:

"Those rubber faces in the simlab always accepted the treatment plan you proposed last year, right? None of them asked you to skip steps in the treatment or to post a deceptive date on insurance forms. I'll bet that not one of them had a resting blood pressure of 180 over 110."

So what is this White Coat Ceremony all about, and why does the Alumni Association embroider and provide these White Coats for you? It's certainly not to promote White Coat Hypertension, right?

Until about 1900 physicians wore black in order to communicate the solemn nature of their role, and possibly because in those days, a visit to the doctor was often followed by death. At some point around the turn of that century medical personnel began to wear white to communicate cleanliness and safety in infection control.

You won't wear white in the clinic. The white coat you get today is symbolic – a symbol of trust. We trust you to take care of patients because our patients must trust you.

A 2005 study published in the [American Journal of Medicine](#) found that

"patients overwhelmingly favor physicians in professional attire with a white coat. Wearing professional dress while providing patient care by physicians may favorably influence trust and confidence-building in the medical encounter."

The study also found that respondents favored a white coat over surgical scrubs by a 76% to 10% margin, while casual dress was preferred by only 5% of patients. Trust and confidence were significantly associated with professional attire, and patients reported that they were significantly more willing to share their social, sexual, and psychological problems with a physician who is professionally dressed.

So, this is not just a fashion statement we are making today. It's about trust.

We will study the concept of professionalism in your ethics course, and the core idea is this: professionals perform important, complicated tasks for vulnerable people who do not understand what is being done, or even what the doctor is saying. Patients must trust you to do things that they cannot do for themselves and cannot effectively evaluate.

Another passage from a student paper makes this point better than I can:

“Everything went smoothly. I brought my young patient back to the mother and explained post-op instructions to her. She was totally shocked that in addition to fillings, we did extractions. She explained to me that she didn't know that an extraction meant pulling teeth out.”

Patients are often eager to trust you and rely on your judgment, as this paper observed:

“I explained that she needed a cleaning to help keep her gums healthy, but it was up to her with regard to fixing the chip on her front tooth. While she expressed concern over the cost, she kept saying things like, “If you think I should, then I will” and “I trust you and will do it if you think it will make me look better.”

This patient is asking you, a dental student, to decide what's good for her.

You may have noticed that we talk a lot about excellence and being exceptional here. The people who run the Dugoni School of Dentistry, many of whom are sitting here on the stage to my right are not about the business of mediocrity. We don't aim to be “average.” We are determined to be special, to aim very high, and to set standards for great dental education now and in the future. That might sound a bit pretentious, but we mean it, and we believe that if we go after greatness we're likely catch at least some of it, even when we fall short.

But greatness — or exceptional dental education — does not mean just great preps and crowns. It's much more than that. And you second-year students are about to make the big transition from technical to clinical.

We are known here for our kind approach and positive attitude, which we refer to as Humanism. To some significant extent we are known to be “great” in the healthcare community because of Humanism. That may even be one of the reasons you chose Pacific. This reputation didn't happen by accident, and it's a valuable thing, indeed. It's one of the reasons I've stayed at the Dugoni School all these years, as it's a great place to work.

There are plenty of dentists out there with exceptional technical skills, but they are really not “great” unless they do some positive good for patients and others. Goodness and greatness go hand in hand. Technical skills are essential, and they form a foundation for the important things you will be able to do for others in the future. But, technical skills are not enough. You have to make a decision to be special, to get really good at connecting with people, to listening to them so that you can accurately feel what they need, and to deliver it. You need to think about this matter now, because now is the time when you start developing habits that will shape and last a lifetime. It's like what we told you about your ergonomics last year. Start off on the right track and that will become normal for you. Don't just get by, hoping that you can establish better habits later. And the most important habit is that of integrity: walking your talk and doing the right thing, even when it's inconvenient or even difficult. **Make that a habit.** Take good care of patients, no matter what they can or cannot offer you.

I know this all sounds a bit lofty or even corny, but it's very real, and it will confront you very soon.

Here's one last example from a student paper:

“My biggest ethical dilemma in dental school is whether I should put my needs as a student dentist over my patients' needs. Especially at the end of the quarter when there are requirements and test cases to be completed, I find myself tempted to give special attention to patients who can meet those requirements. Also, because I am applying to a specialty residency, I'm tempted to prioritize my grade above other issues, which would put my needs above my patients' needs. Unfortunately, we as students risk becoming programmed to evaluate patients based on how they can help us and whether or not we consider them valuable.”

The most common theme in these student papers has to do with the struggle you will all face in completing the puzzle of competencies, test-cases, and what students call “requirements.” It

should come as no surprise that this process turns out to be challenging. You've done the really hard job of building a technical foundation. Now you have to take your skills to the clinic and figure out how to make it all work. And patients – who don't know what is going on – must trust you to take good care of them.

I'm saying that now is the time to teach yourself how to get these priorities right. This same challenge awaits you after graduation, by the way, except that money and job security take the place of school requirements and competencies. These things tend to get one's attention. You don't know this now, but a habit of integrity, of making good, hard moral choices will serve to benefit you, your practice, and your family in the future in the most important ways: you will feel good about yourself and your career, and you will be more likely to thrive over the long haul.

My final request this morning is that you cooperate, rather than compete. Membership in a profession means that doctors and hygienists collaborate on behalf of the complicated needs of patients. This may require a sudden change in orientation for you, as you have been competing fiercely and successfully for many years now, and things have turned out pretty well. But healthcare is a cooperative venture, and dentistry a team sport, so we urge you to switch gears now and cooperate first. Cooperate with your patients and cooperate with each other. Look for that win-win.

OK. The lecture's over, but here's one last bit of advice:

Celebrate (a little...). You can start this in just a few minutes. Take time to appreciate what you have accomplished so far. Take a deep breath and wear your white coat with pride. You've got a long way to go, but it will surely be worth it, especially if you take the high road.