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### If Medical Schools Can Do It, Why Can't We?

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# If medical schools can do it, why can't we?

*The use of 'white coat ceremonies' to introduce a profession's values*

By **Bari Burke**, professor  
University of Montana School of Law

What would you propose as the welcoming ceremony to law school were you to be primarily concerned with introducing students to the *profession* of law (not simply law school) and with the role of lawyers as professionals? How would you impress upon entering students that entering law school, not the swearing in after graduates pass the bar exam, is the beginning of a legal career and a professional identity? And that lawyers are more than experts on the law — we are respectful and compassionate counselors who help people solve their problems.

More than 90 percent of medical schools in the country now have adopted a “White Coat Ceremony” to do precisely that for entering medical students.<sup>1</sup> In 1993, Dr. Arnold Gold introduced the ceremony at the Columbia University College of Physicians & Surgeons, in which entering medical students are “congratulated on their achievement in being selected as medical students, and told about the commitment that, as student doctors, they are making both to becoming and staying proficient in the science and technique of medicine and also to the human obligations of being a doctor — especially to the central obligations of caring for their patients...”<sup>2</sup>

The white coat ceremony is “a time to recognize and celebrate the wonderful human attributes associated with the medical profession.”<sup>3</sup>

The Gold Foundation states that the white coat ceremony “helps to identify the characteristics of a complete doctor.”<sup>4</sup>

The ceremony is intended to impress upon [students] the primacy of the doctor-patient relationship. It encourages them to enter into a psychological contract in which they accept the obligations inherent in the practice of medicine: to be excellent in science, to be compassionate, and to lead lives of “uprightness and honor.” It is designed to clarify for students that a physician’s responsibility is to take care of patients and also to *care* for patients.<sup>5</sup>

White coat ceremonies are formal, although celebratory as well. Parents and friends of entering medical students are invited to watch the ceremony and attend a party or reception afterward. During the ceremony, the medical faculty, dressed in their own white coats, stand while the new students enter the auditorium. After the talks of the dean, perhaps a distinguished alumni, and almost universally a physician with expertise in medical humanities, comes the “robing ceremo-

ny,” from which the ceremony derives its name.

Each entering medical student climbs onto the stage and members of the stage party, including the dean, help each student into his new white coat. The students are introduced one by one to the audience. After introductions are completed, the students stand and collectively read an oath or declaration of “professional commitment.” In many ceremonies, students sign a book in which the declaration is included.

The components of the ceremony are each designed to “help create an environment that fosters establishing a psychological contract for professionalism and empathy medicine.”<sup>6</sup>

White coat ceremonies emphasize attention to values — the values of family and friends in the audience, the values of the medical school and the medical profession, and the entering students’ commitment to the values, obligations and responsibilities of the medical profession.

This ceremony has its critics<sup>7</sup> who raise three primary objections:

■ The white coat ceremony requires that students take an oath before they understand the responsibilities and implications of the responsibilities imposed by that oath.

■ The white coat ceremony aligns students with faculty, beginning the process of making students part of the professional “club” and removing students from identifying with their own culture and the cultures of their patients.

■ The ceremony attributes to the white coat only its positive associations with professionalism and humanism and ignores that it can also symbolize, for example, an imbalance of power between physician and patient and paternalism in medicine.

A fourth, and perhaps more significant criticism, is that there are better, alternative or additional rituals for demonstrating to entering students “compassionate and humble caregiving.” At least one critic suggests instituting “first Fridays” on which students would visit community sites, such as free clinics, domestic violence shelters, adult day-care centers, rape crisis centers, drug treatment programs or hospice settings” to participate in the activities at those sites.<sup>8</sup> A second alternative is “weekly small-group sessions in which students reflect on their ethical and humanistic values throughout” their medical clerkships or residencies — a journey of self-discovery during medical education, allowing them to withstand the rigors of training that might be experienced as contradictions to core values.

Of course, a medical school (or even a law school) could implement some version of both activities. Doing so would reinforce the messages conveyed at the white coat ceremony.

More than a dozen law schools have adopted a similar ceremony, including an oath.

My specific question for you:

*You are a member of the “Orientation” Committee at the*

law school. That committee is discussing whether to adopt such a ceremony during Orientation Week, and if so, what it should look like. If so, what would be the comparable elements of a ceremony to welcome entering law students to the legal profession and their professional responsibilities? If not, what objections do you have? Do you have any alternatives to the white coat ceremony to suggest to the committee?

By the way, do lawyers have a symbol analogous to a white coat to distribute to entering law students?

## NOTES

1. For detail on these ceremonies, see Raanan Gillon, "White coat ceremonies for new medical students," 26 *J. Med. Ethics* 83 (2000).

2. Gillon, *infra* footnote 1.

3. Jeffrey S. Wilson, "The Kind of Doctor You Want to Be," Presentation at the White Coat Ceremony, University of Iowa (8/18/2006). [www.medicine.uiowa.edu/ocac/programsrecords/whitecoat/wcc\\_keyadd06.htm](http://www.medicine.uiowa.edu/ocac/programsrecords/whitecoat/wcc_keyadd06.htm).

4. Gillon, *infra* footnote 1.

5. "The Arnold P. Gold Foundation "White Coat Ceremony," Office of Student Affairs and Curriculum, Student Programs and Records, University of Iowa College of Medicine, [www.medicine.uiowa.edu/osac/programsrecords/whitecoat/index.htm](http://www.medicine.uiowa.edu/osac/programsrecords/whitecoat/index.htm).

6. Gillon, *infra* footnote 1.

7. One of the most persuasive articles criticizing the ceremony is, Delese Wear, PhD, "On White Coats and Professional Development: The Formal and the Hidden Curricula, 129 *Annals of Internal Medicine* 734 (1998). A second critical article to which many have responded is R.M. Veatch, "White coat ceremonies: a second opinion," 28 *J. Med. Ethics* 5 (2002)

8. Delese Wear, PhD, "On White Coats and Professional Development," *infra* footnote 5.

9. William T. Branch Jr., MD, "Deconstructing the White Coat," 129 *Annals of Internal Med.* 740 (11/1/98).

## UM Law & Policy Conference to examine energy policy

Energy issues facing the nation and the role the American West plays in providing energy resources are the focus of the 31st Annual Public Land Law Conference to be held at the University of Montana School of Law Sept. 24-26.

The *Public Land & Resources Law Review* will present a program with an emphasis on how our laws and policies can position the Rocky Mountain States to play a leadership role in sustainable energy policies.

"Rocky Mountain Energy Leadership: Strategies for a New Energy Future" will begin with a keynote address by Patricia Limerick, director of the Center for the American West and co-author of the report "What Every Westerner Should Know About Energy." The keynote address will be held at the University Center Theater on Monday, Sept. 24. The keynote address and a reception following the speech at the offices of the Clark Fork Coalition are free and open to the public.

Leaders from government, industry, academia, the legal and conservation communities and beyond will explore

opportunities and challenges the Rocky Mountain region faces in light of growing and changing energy demands. The conference will offer a broad context of national law and policy as well as detailed discussions of current regional issues. Speakers will cover a variety of topics, including the Energy Policy Act of 2005, the role of renewable energy resources, reducing carbon emissions, Gov. Schweitzer's "Clean and Green" energy plan, and the trans-boundary effects of coal mining in Canada north of Glacier National Park.

The conference offers 11.0 CLE credits for attorneys. Faculty members and full-time students may attend at no charge, but are asked to register.

Registration forms, conference fees and a schedule of events are online at [www.publiclandlawconference.org](http://www.publiclandlawconference.org).

The Public Land Law Conference is presented by the *Public Land & Resources Law Review*, a student-run publication of UM's School of Law, in partnership with the University's Public Policy Research Institute.

For further information, call 406-243-6568 or e-mail [plrlr@umontana.edu](mailto:plrlr@umontana.edu).

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