



Supplemental Q&A: “Human Flourishing, Caring and Character in the Medical Profession: To What End?”

On January 26, 2021, health professionals, learners and educators gathered for the first session in the Kern National Network for Caring & Character discussion series, “The Medical Profession Through the Lens of Human Flourishing.” Within the session, three presenters fielded questions on how character strengths align with the culture of medicine, the importance of elements of caring and how to navigate differing ideas of flourishing. Because time did not permit all audience questions to be addressed, the following is a lightly edited summary of remaining questions and responses from the presenters:



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Q: What approaches are there to measuring character among medical trainees in order to better cultivate growth in this area in our trainees?

Leep: What I love about this question is how it hones in on the *reason* for wanting to measure character: to better cultivate character growth. It’s critical to keep this goal in mind as we think about measurement.

One way to approach this question is to consider methods of assessment. Many traditional methods of assessment in medical education focus on *knowledge*, which is an important component of character. But we know from our own experience and from journeying alongside patients that knowing the right thing to do is different than actually doing it. Other methods of assessment rely on observations of behaviors. Observational assessments can get at the “*practices*” and “*habits*” aspects of character but can be logistically challenging—particularly since the most telling assessments would occur over time and across situations (especially those characterized by adversity or access to power, two situations that test and reveal our character in ways day-to-day life may not).

Sometimes this can be achieved by engaging multiple assessors (e.g., multisource feedback). However, the situations that most reveal our character do not always lend themselves to observation (i.e., “Character is who you are when no one’s looking”). A further limitation of both knowledge and observation-based approaches is that they have a hard time getting at *motivation*—doing the right thing for the right reasons.

This is where reflection can be a very powerful tool, especially if the goal is character growth. What I have in mind here is creating spaces and opportunities for learners to thoughtfully reflect on who they are, where their commitments and values lie and how these align with their actions, their ways of engaging with others and the world's needs. We don't often think of reflection as "assessment," but encouraging our learners to engage with questions like these is critical for character growth to be an intentional rather than incidental part of medical education.

A holistic measure of character is challenging, given its complex, developmental and situationally sensitive nature. As the analogy goes, there are some things you can take apart, examine carefully and then put back together again (like a bicycle) and other things that are less suited to this approach (like a frog). In some respects, character is more "frog" than "bicycle."

However, various self-assessment tools and worksheets have been developed within the positive psychology tradition that individuals can use to identify their "signature strengths" and practice using these strengths in day-to-day situations. Some examples are available on [this website](#). There are also instruments available to measure particular character strengths or virtues, such as the [Compassion Scale](#) or [Moral Courage Scale](#). However, I would caution against using instruments like these for high-stakes or summative purposes given the potential for unintended consequences that could end up being counterproductive to the intended goal (e.g., incentivizing dishonesty, impression management or "gaming").

Q: What thoughts or strategies do you have [for] how medical educators can help trainees connect with sources of meaning/purpose in their personal journey of flourishing in a pluralist culture?

Leep: This is another excellent question and highlights the importance of not only asking questions of competence ("What can I do?") but also questions of identity, meaning and purpose ("Who am I? Why am I?"). What comes to mind for me is the paper entitled "[Professionalism in Modern Medicine: Does the Emperor Have Any Clothes?](#)" by Dr. Warren Kinghorn and colleagues. This paper talks about the importance of allowing our learners to stay connected with the moral communities that energize and motivate their professional behavior. The commitments and values rooted in these communities are often what infuses our lives and our work with meaning and purpose. In a pluralistic culture, we sometimes shy away from engaging with these roots, be they religious, political or otherwise—perhaps for fear of offense or in an effort to create an "apolitical" learning environment (which of course isn't really possible). This does a disservice to our learners for at least three reasons. First, it perpetuates a false dichotomy between our "personal" beliefs and our "professional" selves. Second, it fails to foster connections that are powerful sources of meaning and purpose. Third, it prevents opportunities for learners to be exposed to the moral communities of others and appreciate ways of working together, even when the underlying reasons and motivations for doing so may differ in profound and seemingly irreconcilable ways. This seems to me to be a challenge before us as educators—how to help learners foster these connections and engage in these discussions, particularly in an increasingly divided and divisive society.

Luk: I believe that connecting human flourishing with professional identity formation provides a possible path forward in a pluralist culture. Similar to human flourishing, I believe that the journey of professional identity formation encompasses the life experiences that inform and influence perceptions and actions that shape the core of being. I think that promoting inclusive and holistic approaches in professional identity formation could enable trainees to chart and share personal journeys of human flourishing. These approaches could be formal, informal and hidden in curriculum. I wonder how we [as educators] could be more intentional in weaving human flourishing into learning.

Q: You have focus[ed] on individual characteristics. What about the care team, which needs to work across professional [identity] boundaries? When that doesn't happen, good intentions don't get translated to good care. What can you share about your thinking around care teams?

Leep: This is such a critical question because none of us lives or works in a vacuum (even if the pandemic has perhaps left some of us feeling that way!). Traditional conceptions of the physician professional role emphasized biomedical expertise and compassionate care for patients. However, current medical practice requires physicians who internalize teamwork, interprofessional collaborations and responsiveness to/responsibility for the broader healthcare system as part of their professional role. The article "[Medical Education: Part of the Problem and Part of the Solution](#)" by KNN board member Dr. Catherine Lucey makes a compelling case for this paradigm shift. If medicine is evolving in this manner, we need to ensure our learning and work environments are fostering the kinds of dispositions, habits and practices that enable optimal team-based care—not only for patients, but also for the healthcare system. This may require elevating certain virtues that have historically received less emphasis in medicine, such as humility, loyalty and creativity.

Luk: I believe that human flourishing aligns well with the core competencies of interprofessional collaborative practice. As a part of an interprofessional team, professionals demonstrate the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes for effective collaborative care. As I review these competencies, I believe that character, caring and human flourishing infuse those competencies with the orientation to a shared purpose and a common good.¹

Q: How do we show students our commitment to their true flourishing when there is so much focus on "passing the test" and jumping through so many stressful hoops?

Leep: I struggle with this question so often myself! It's always a challenge to balance the "urgent" with the "important"—or, as David Brooks puts it, the "resume virtues" with the "eulogy virtues." At a systems level, we as educators need to attend [to] the demands we put on learners and ask ourselves if the systems around them are supporting or undermining their flourishing. Much of my current scholarly work focuses on just this.

At a personal level, it's been helpful for me to view flourishing as an orientation rather than a destination. So often we aspire to an elusive state where our personal and professional lives are "balanced" and all aspects of human flourishing are thoughtfully attended (physical, emotional, spiritual well-being, financial security, social relationships, happiness, meaning and purpose). Reframing flourishing as an orientation allows us the flexibility to accommodate demanding seasons (e.g., residency training, having a baby) while also being attentive to the indicators in our lives that let us know when something important has been neglected for too long.

For example, maybe I haven't snuggled and read books with my kids before bedtime for quite some time. That's a "check engine" light for me. When something like that happens, I need to honestly ask myself, "Is this a season—e.g., am I staffing a busy hospital service or working on a grant? Or is this a pattern—e.g., am I taking on too much or prioritizing my resume over my relations?" If it's a season, then an orientation toward flourishing involves gratitude for snuggle times in the past, savoring the fleeting moments I have with my kids in the present and anticipating returning to our usual bedtime routine in the future. If it's a pattern, then something needs to change: It's time to ask myself tougher questions about how to bring my decisions and actions into better alignment with my values and commitments.

¹Interprofessional Education Collaborative. (2016). Core competencies for interprofessional collaborative practice: 2016 update. Washington, DC: Interprofessional Education Collaborative. Available at: <https://www.ipecollaborative.org/ipec-core-competencies>.

Luk: I believe that explicitly promoting human flourishing in our learner environments could better enable learners to be more resilient in their professional development journeys. I believe that the wellness and flourishing of individuals in learners' professional development promotes the right milieu to sustain learners, rethink learning and vitalize a culture that values flourishing as much as professional achievements.

Q: If character is understanding and improving one's own self (i.e., inner journey) in relation to a given sociocultural environment, I wonder how character helps us with the outer journey.

Leep: Even though we experience character as an individual phenomenon, this question rightly points out that character can't be understood apart from the sociocultural context. This is true both with respect to how character manifests at a moment in time and how character is formed over time.

When we zoom in and consider character expression at a moment in time, numerous studies in psychology have demonstrated how character-relevant behaviors are influenced by automatic, subconscious processes that are quite sensitive to situational cues. From a character perspective, this challenges us to think critically about situations, anticipate the potential challenges we may encounter and rehearse our responses. For example, in medicine there are predictable conflicts—e.g., values conflicts, patient-patient conflicts, conflicts related to unmet deficit needs—and we can help our learners anticipate these and rehearse how they might respond. The book "Understanding Medical Professionalism" has a lot of practical suggestions for doing this. It also challenges us to consider our role in selecting and shaping our situations—the people we spend time with, the environments we inhabit, the mindsets and self-talk we habitually employ, etc. It's helpful to periodically ask ourselves if our situations (or ways of thinking about them) are promoting or undermining our character growth.

When we zoom out and think about character formation over time, these individual situations combine to shape how we think, feel and act and are inevitably shaped by our sociocultural context, often in insidious ways. As the analogy goes, asking someone to describe their culture is like asking a fish to describe water. Culture is the water we swim in and its influence can hence be difficult to appreciate—though the increasing diversity in our society is making this somewhat easier, I think. Regardless, it is important to critically appraise the values of one's culture and consider where they align (or not) with our beliefs about the purpose and meaning of life and what constitutes a life well lived.

Luk: I believe that the inner and outward journeys continuously inform each other and indelibly evolve longitudinally as integrated units. I believe that one's actions and words reflect outwardly the inner journey and allow other individuals to perceive and interpret one's intentions. Similarly, I believe that one perceives the outward experiences through one's inner lenses, which are continuously polished and then refocused with greater wisdom and insight in time.

Q: This is great thinking; thank you. Here is something with which to grapple: So much of the rhetoric starts with the assumption of pathology, whether it is "fixing" or "healing" etc. But flourishing is about maximizing potential even in the absence (at least theoretically) of pathology as a starting point. Prevention, optimization, etc.

Leep: Thank you for sharing this insightful comment. The way we talk about caring and character can sometimes imply there is a deficit, even if that is not the intent, which can be a stumbling block for engaging learners and faculty. Part of our role as educators is to recognize and affirm the many virtues our learners and faculty bring to their work, help them develop the practical wisdom they will need to enact these virtues in a healthcare context and provide learning and work environments that encourage rather than impede wise actions.

Miller: I agree that the deficit mindset is not consistent with the goal of flourishing, which embraces growth and learning instead of fixing. Healthcare has been dominated by problem-oriented approaches—the medical record is more or less structured that way with its problem lists that must be updated with each encounter. Some are starting to advocate for a goal-based approach, which seems more aligned with flourishing. On the other hand, to me, healing is very different from fixing—it seems more holistic and less purely technical. You can be fixed but not healed. If healing is the process of “making whole,” then I wonder if healing in fact does have a place in the flourishing landscape. ■

Access More Materials

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<https://knncaringcharactermedicine.org/KNN/Events/Past>

