

## Poetry and Professionalism

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Serendipity characterizes life in the Pritzker School of Medicine, University of Chicago. Being in the privileged position of working with talented students, residents, faculty, and staff, I have encounters nearly every day of unexpected surprise. Such was the case several years ago when two of our students presented the idea of creating *White Coat Pocket Poetry*, a small book of poems for each third-year medical student. Students were encouraged to use the book in whatever way would be most meaningful to them—in reflecting privately on their experiences, in speaking with their families about their medical training, or in talking with their patients.

Soon after *White Coat Pocket Poetry* was published, another moment of serendipity occurred. This time, the surprise came through an unsolicited e-mail from one of our faculty members offering to personally fund a poetry contest in our medical center. We soon put together a committee and opened the contest to all physicians, nurses, students, and staff. The Pritzker Poetry Contest was born in 2011, and the entries that followed touched our hearts and souls deeply.

From my view in the dean's office, why should I support these initiatives? Obviously, I cannot support all of the good ideas that cross my desk. But these endeavors were different.

These initiatives grew out of the direct experience of caring for patients through the hearts of two third-year students and, later, of one faculty member. Both of these initiatives connected to the overall goal of the medical school to help students develop into professionals. This development is not straightforward and does not take place only through learning pathophysiology and differential diagnosis. The attitudes and behaviors that characterize the true professional are those born when hearts and minds are aligned and rooted in authenticity and humanity.

The many activities and experiences that an individual student has during medical school contribute to his or her development as a professional. Those experiences that link to the inner life are especially powerful in developing the heart of a professional. For some physicians, their experiences with art or music or literature create the space and reflection to connect with their inner life. Poetry—both the reading and the writing—is a powerful vehicle for exploring feelings and observations. This exploration leads directly to the inner life where a true professional is born. What began as serendipity is directly aligned with the core purpose of our school and with the ultimate goal of educating compassionate physicians who will contribute to the betterment of humanity.

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