

The White Coat

By A/Prof Chin Jing Jih

A/Prof Chin delivered the original version of this speech as the Guest of Honour at the National University of Singapore Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine (YLLSoM) White Coat Ceremony, which was held on 7 August 2013 at the University Cultural Centre.

First of all, please allow me to express my sincere thanks to Prof John Wong, Prof Yeoh Khay Guan and the Deanery of YLLSoM for this invitation, which I will always cherish and remember. To be invited back to one's alma mater for an important and momentous event such as this, is personally a magical and gratifying experience. Although it has been 23 years since I graduated from this school, those five years in medical school have left me with many fond memories and valuable friendships. It is therefore a great honour for me today to be given this opportunity to address the new medical students in this initiation ceremony, in the presence of their teachers and proud families.

One of the first thoughts I hope to share with you this evening relates to the objective of this White Coat Ceremony. While the occasion is indeed marked by an abundance of positive emotions and goodwill, I feel that it is important for you to appreciate the deeper rationale for holding the White Coat Ceremony. Personally, I can assure you that this is not just a simple welcome dinner decorated with pomp and circumstance, just to celebrate your excellent decision in choosing to study Medicine. We are here for a far more profound reason, which we shall explore by first reviewing the historical background of this emblematic white coat and its enviable status in the medical profession.



Most of you will agree that your earliest childhood memory of a doctor, whether pleasant or unpleasant, is the person in the white coat. Patients expect to be treated in doctors' offices, hospitals and clinics by an individual wearing white. So what is so magical about the white colour of the coat? Some students in the past have even complained, "Why choose a colour that is so difficult to maintain and wash?" How did it make that dramatic change from the previous black coats to white coats, which has remained the preeminent symbol of doctors for over 100 years?

The historical account of the so-called "medical white coat" is rather enlightening. Unlike the White Coat Ceremony, which began only in 1993, the association of the white coat with the medical profession dates back to the 19th century. The white coat rose to prominence around 1889, for several reasons closely related to the evolution of the profession itself.

How the white coat rose to prominence

Firstly, fuelled by the growing understanding of antisepsis and the dramatic improvement in outcomes due to the discovery and adoption of aseptic techniques during surgery, the white colour of the doctor's coat reflected an emphasis on hygiene and "cleanliness" as a branding feature of safe Medicine.

Secondly, this new scientific appreciation of antisepsis and its role in the survival of patients, together with the birth of bacteria-based Medicine, were critical in moving the practice of Medicine from mysticism, home remedies and quackery to the realm of bioscience in the 19th century. Indeed, many exciting laboratory discoveries were dramatically expanding what doctors could do to help patients. This marked the merger of science and Medicine, and doctors sought to emphasise this milestone transition to the more scientific approach in modern Medicine by wearing what was considered the most recognisable symbol of the scientist – the white laboratory coat. The white coat has come to represent the credibility of modern Medicine through systematic scientific inquiry and intellectual rigour.

At the same time, a third development was the growing popularity of white, as the symbol of healing, cleanliness and hope, among hospitals. The same scientific discoveries were changing hospitals from houses for the dying, to houses for healing. For the doctors, the white coat also became a symbol of professionalism, purity of intent and seriousness of purpose.

So each time you put on the white coat, you should remember that you are actually making a similar public commitment to the defining values of professional Medicine – attention to patient safety, evidence-based treatment, and a deep conviction to a culture of service. But equally relevant and significant is what the white coat has come

to represent to our patients. Today, many patients view the white coat as a "cloak of compassion" and a symbol of the care and hope they expect to receive from their doctors. The white coat is therefore an apt reminder that we cannot claim to be effective healers until and unless we complement scientific rigour and intellectual honesty, with compassion and empathy for our patients.

The significance of the White Coat Ceremony

It is a common but serious mistake to perceive the medical school merely as an institution of knowledge, and to assume that the actual training to be a medical practitioner begins only after graduation. In case you are still wondering, the apprenticeship, the inculcation of professional attitudes and ethical values, started on your first day as a medical student. What you are experiencing this evening is a ceremony that marks the beginning of this new phase in your lives. The Arnold P Gold Foundation in the US is a not-for-profit organisation whose mission is to humanise healthcare by advocating for compassionate care coupled with scientific excellence. The foundation actively advocates the White Coat Ceremony as a step in professional development that connects some of the best qualities we would like to see in physicians with the incoming students.

I hope that by now, you would have some idea as to why you are here tonight. The White Coat Ceremony, including the Medical Students' Pledge that you will be taking, symbolises the acceptance of a professional calling to put patients first – through the acquisition of clinical skills and knowledge, and as the famous quote from *Spider-Man* goes: "With great power there must also come great responsibility". You must therefore be mindful of the professional responsibilities that come with the donning of the white coat – a commitment towards the interests and well-being of our patients. The White Coat Ceremony is therefore a public proclamation of your commitment to a standard of professionalism and caring, and the white coat is an emblem of the trust you must earn from patients.

Five ways to reinspire yourself

I hope you realise too that donning the white coat at a public ceremony does not immunise you against the many struggles and challenges in your journey towards becoming a full-fledged medical doctor. The Medical Students' Pledge surely does not sound like a magical spell that will produce a powerful genie. For some of you, the journey ahead may not be an easy one. You will soon find the white coat handy in soaking up your perspiration and tears, and perhaps even blood in a figurative sense.

But the struggle against the academic, emotional and social demands of the course will help to nurture your professional resilience and maturity as a doctor. Despite the many ups and downs in your career, you must do

your best to remain positive, and retain your sense of purpose and commitment towards your education, your values, and your patients. Unfortunately, some do lose their idealism along the way and develop cynicism as a coping mechanism. So I would like to briefly suggest five simple sources of inspiration that you can consider when the going gets tough.

To begin, a simple and convenient way to rejuvenate yourself may be to revisit the personal statement that you used to apply for medical school admission. I am painfully aware that there is a prevailing scepticism about these personal statements, but in my years of conducting admission interviews, I have never come across a negative or pessimistic piece. Most of them contain megajoules of raw and positive energy, and inspiring accounts of why each of you were moved to apply to study Medicine. The sincerity and positivism in the statements that were meant to impress and move the interviewers may just do the same for you – inject some fresh therapeutic energy into you and help you to emerge even stronger from each challenge.

A second resource that will provide both comfort and advice is, of course, your families. Families are a powerful source of encouragement and support because the bonds are the oldest and strongest, and your family will love and accept you unconditionally, regardless of your recent clinical assessment scores in Physiology or Anatomy. To them, you are always special and they will stand by you, regardless.

Friends and classmates are also an important source of help and encouragement, simply because of the proportion of time you will be spending with them in your undergraduate career. Learning alone is never as fun as learning in a group, and many of these friendships last for a lifetime. Learning to share and help one another in times of need will also help develop collaborative skills that will enhance your productivity and experience in learning.

Fourthly, you can always rely on your teachers and mentors for wise counsel. Most of them have volumes of wisdom and experience to share, and can serve as critical moral compasses and morale boosters to your professional development. They can also help to make your medical school experience an enriching and enjoyable one. All you need is the humility to ask, the attentiveness to listen, and the willingness to be guided.

In this regard, the White Coat Ceremony is also special because the white coats are put on you by your teachers. You will soon realise that the medical profession is unique in the doctors' overt and frequent acknowledgement of their teachers. I hope that years after graduating from medical school, even if you were to forget everything I have said this evening (which I am sure you will), you will never forget who your teachers are, and what they have done for you in your journey of learning. The value of respect and gratitude for our teachers and mentors must be retained as a core

professional value, regardless of the tendency these days for the rest of society to view relationships through the lenses of business and personal utility.

And finally, the last prominent source of inspiration has to be our patients. The story of patients and their courageous struggle as they battle their illnesses, how they cope and live with discomfort and disabilities while remaining cheerful and optimistic, will always move you. Their expression of gratitude and appreciation for you can instantly transform your lousy day to one of the best days of your life in medical school. In addition to teaching us to be good technicians, they also help to mould you into empathetic and compassionate healers.

Final thoughts

The White Coat Ceremony is a ritual with a deep meaning to the profession, and the participating students and teachers. It is a public act of commitment, very much like a wedding – the presentation and wearing of the rings, and the taking of the wedding vows by the couple. Like the Physician's Pledge and its affirmation in a public ceremony, professional rituals such as reciting the Medical Students' Pledge should be kept alive and be taken seriously by all. I would therefore like to end my speech with an elegant paragraph taken from the book *The Rebirth of the Clinic* by Dr Daniel Sulmasy, a respected internist and medical ethicist:

Physicians are ordinary persons. They are called to reach beyond the ordinary, however, toward a transcendental ideal. They are called to a life of virtue in a profession that is dedicated to a common purpose – the care of sick persons. The enterprise is inherently moral, in large part because physicians declare it to be so by the oath they swear at graduation. Physicians and the society they serve should learn to take physicians' oaths seriously.

Dear students, it leaves me to convey my heartiest congratulations to you for becoming a member of the healthcare family, and as one commentator puts it, be transformed by your white coat across temporal and physical boundaries from wherever you were before, into the world of thinking and learning about the practice of Medicine.

I wish you all the best in your exciting journey. Thank you. **SMA**



A/Prof Chin is President of the 54th SMA Council. Like most doctors, he too has bills to pay and mouths to feed, and wrestles daily with materialistic desires that are beyond his humble salary. He, however, believes that a peaceful sleep at night is even more essential.