

Wisdom stories for medical students on graduation day

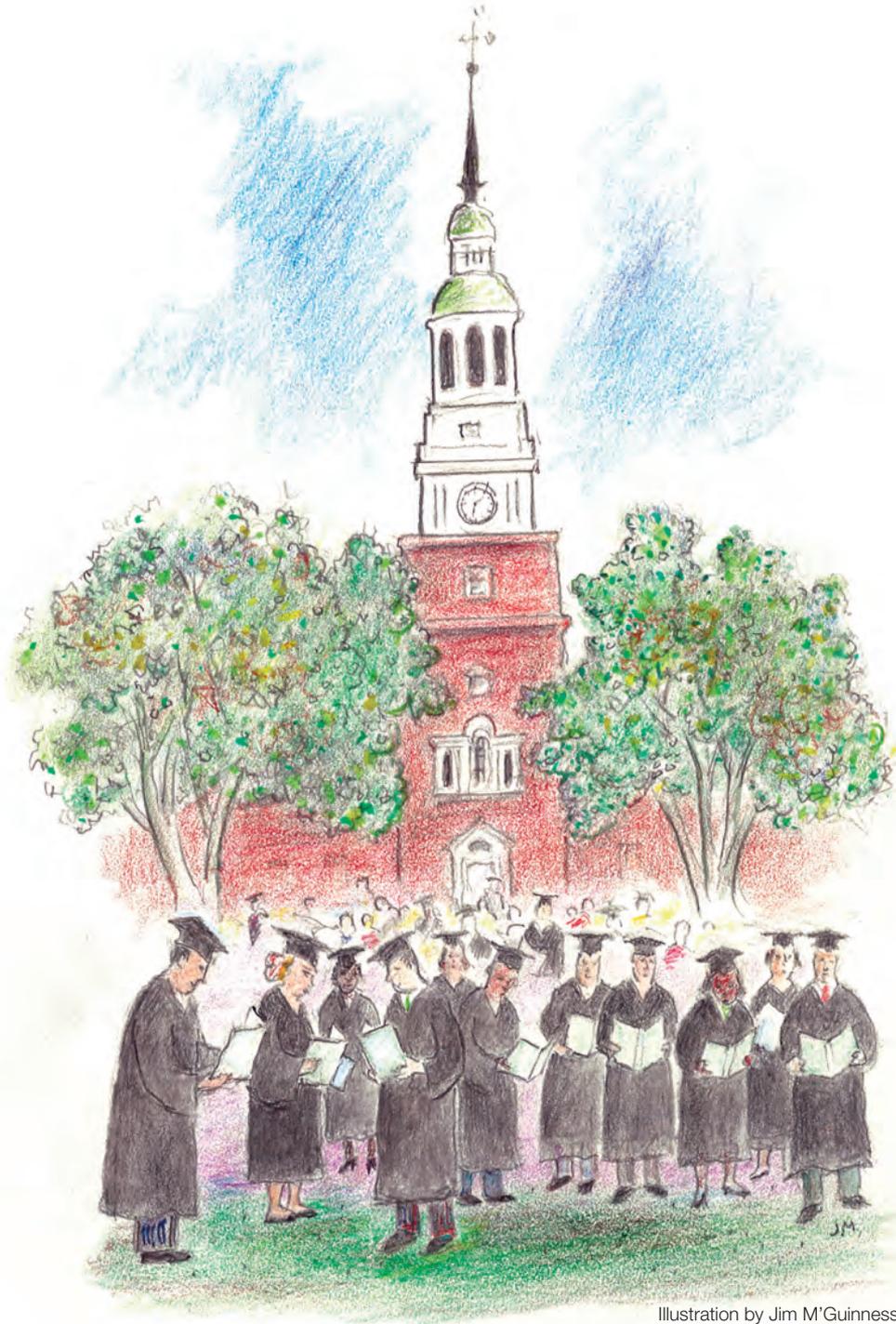


Illustration by Jim M'Guinness

A gift from alumni

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In his 1905 farewell address to Canadian and American medical students Sir William Osler compared wisdom with knowledge:

What we call sense or wisdom is knowledge, ready for use, made effective, and bears the same relation to knowledge itself that bread does to wheat.¹

Alumni of the Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth recently initiated two new rituals to provide medical students with examples of wisdom derived from knowledge, leavened by experience.

The first ritual is intended to offer wisdom to medical students as one of their farewell gifts on graduation day. A book of stories written for the graduates by more than two dozen alumni of their medical school. The stories are based on extensive clinical and personal experiences. The book is given to students individually at the reception following their graduation ceremony. The tradition first began June 3, 2017. Additional copies are provided to parents upon request.

Thirty-four stories written by 28 alumni from the classes of 1955 to 2009. The stories are approximately 500 words in length with most of them between 400 and 800 words.

A wide spectrum of physicians contributed from the fields of cardiovascular surgery, primary care, oncology, OB/GYN, psychiatry,

pediatrics, pediatric surgery, neurology, senior hospital administration, health care delivery and policy, orthopedic surgery, infectious diseases, and public health.

Many stories illustrate medical wisdom through sharing poignant

clinical experiences, some involving their personal illness or that of someone close. Most are of a very personal and candid nature. All are distilled from years and decades of experience. Some stories discuss diagnostic, therapeutic, or ethical dilemmas. Others address iatrogenesis, medical-legal issues, resilience and remembering to take care of oneself. Some offer specific pearls of wisdom in the form of mentorship, advice, and values illustrating the importance of trust, humility, listening, and striving to heal the spirit as well as the body.

Although the inaugural book was self-financed, a generous long-term funding source has been identified that will allow new collections of stories to be given as a gift to students every year into perpetuity.

Collecting the stories

Alumni were asked to contribute stories via:

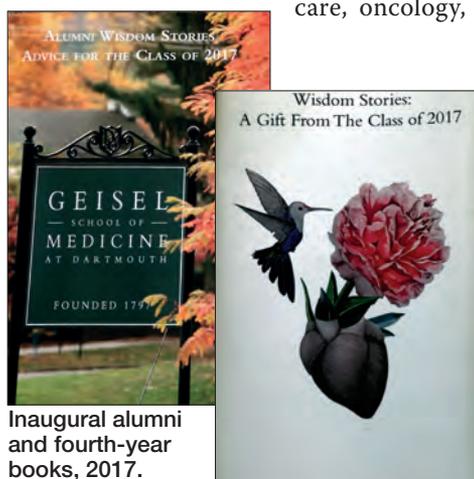
1. Class secretaries from 1942-2016 who were contacted by E-mail;
2. At a 2016 continuing medical education seminar for reunion classes; and
3. By directly contacting classmates, friends, and colleagues.

The production team met each month from September 2016 through March 2017 with a group of medical students who were actively supportive of the idea of creating this new medical school ritual. They offered multiple ideas, suggested stories of interest to them; created a website where stories could be shared in a confidential manner; and created dialogue. In addition, feedback on all the alumni stories was requested from these students as well as from two additional alumni.

A gift for second-year students

The original plan was to also share these alumni stories with second-year medical students at the annual transition ceremony in April 2017, marking their progression from the classroom to clinical work. However, it was found to be more helpful for the second-year students if senior-year (fourth-year) students were to provide medical wisdom stories and advice based on their own clinical experiences prior to graduation.

A total of 24 stories including two poems, were written by 20 fourth-year medical students. The stories were 500-800 words in length, and the collection was bound as a soft cover book. The cover had an original illustration by one of the student contributors. As with the alumni stories, most shared poignant clinical



Inaugural alumni and fourth-year books, 2017.

Wisdom stories for medical students

experiences; some were very personal; and a few offered short lists of practical advice for beginning clinical work. Several offered suggestions for balancing work and life.

The Dean of the Medical school cited several of these fourth-year stories in his graduation day address June 3, 2017. He expressed support for continuing both of these new medical school rituals.

Both books have a short dedication statement and ask that the students receiving the books contribute their own stories in the future as part of this new ritual, thereby creating what will become a tradition. The dedication, in part, reads: May these Wisdom stories from alumni be a book-end on your Graduation Day to the White Coat ceremony when you began Medical School.

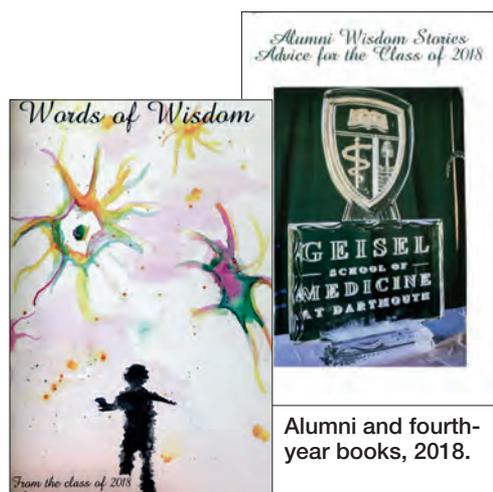
Fourth-year students who expressed interest in contributing their own stories were provided the paper *Wisdom in Medicine* written by two physicians William Branch and Gary Mitchell. These authors focused on a series of narratives by doctors gathered from a workshop in 2003. Each story offered examples of wisdom. They conclude with four “facilitative pathways that may awaken hunger for wisdom in trainees and young doctors: reflection, self-awareness, storytelling, and group support.” They emphasized that “Seeking wisdom should become embedded in the culture of medicine.”²

Integrating wisdom into the culture of medicine

Adding these new medical wisdom stories from alumni for students on graduation day, and by fourth-year students for second-year students, can help integrate wisdom-seeking into the culture of medicine. Other examples of important rituals at the Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth include:

- › The White Coat Ceremony at the beginning of medical school for first-year students;
- › The creation of a class mission statement;
- › A memorial service of thanks to the families of the anatomy donors;
- › The transition ceremony at the end of the second-year when students are welcomed to the clinical experiences; and
- › Graduation.

The White Coat Ceremony (initiated in 1993 by Dr. Arnold P. Gold at Columbia University College of Physicians and Surgeons)³ at the beginning of medical school coupled with the alumni gift of wisdom stories at graduation are complementary bookends to the medical school experience.



Each of these rituals contain stories as examples of a life in medicine.

Impacting lived experiences

Hopefully these wisdom stories will impact the lived experiences of the clinical clerks and graduates as they grow in medicine and encounter situations that require wisdom.

Hopefully all of these medical school rituals, both new and established, will create a culture where wisdom is recognized, nurtured, and celebrated.

As a third step in the effort to share medical wisdom, we joined two fourth-year medical students to meet with a group of 20 Dartmouth College undergraduates interested in a career in medicine. During an informal dinner we read a selection of medical wisdom stories written by medical students and alumni, and invited comments. A candid discussion followed. The focus of the conversation initially was on the specific stories, and then more generally on concerns related to the practice of medicine.

Experience is the leavening that can transform medical knowledge into medical wisdom. Sharing of medical wisdom stories in the above ways offers a model to be explored and individualized across the United States and international medical and allied health professional schools.

References:

1. Osler W. The Student Life. In: Osler W. *Aequanimitas*, Third Edition. McGraw Hill, Inc. 1906: 397–423.
2. Branch WT, Mitchell GA. *Wisdom in Medicine*. *Pharos Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Med Soc*. 2011 Summer; 74(3): 12-7. PMID: 21877511.
3. The White Coat Ceremony. The Arnold P. Gold Foundation. <http://www.gold-foundation.org/what-do-medical-students-hope-to-remember-about-their-white-coat-ceremony/>.

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