

Medicine's most important symbols are the white coat and the stethoscope. Symbolism is what this ceremony is all about. The Hippocratic Oath is more than 2000 year old; but the white coat has come to symbolize the practice of medicine only a bit more than 100 years ago. The obvious question is why, and why did the white coat become the gown of physicians?

If you walk the corridors of our department of Internal Medicine on the 5<sup>th</sup> floor you see many pictures of great physicians that have left their mark through out history on the practice of medicine; very few of them if any are wearing white coats. The white coat was first worn by scientists in the science labs of the 19<sup>th</sup> century; and this was no coincidence. The adoption of the white coat by the medical profession signified the very important transition of medicine from the realm of reading the stars to that of science. White, in contradistinction to the black robes of the clergy (who were entrusted with caring for the sick for centuries), also helped to symbolize the emergence of hope that the new science bestowed on the practice of medicine; which was transformed from the simple soothing of the sick to its healing powers. Furthermore, It gave meaning to Hippocrates Oath: "In purity and uprightness I will pass my life and practice my art". Imagine the transition: from the art of dying to the art of living. Consider yourselves lucky, like we do, to practice medicine in the days of the white coat.

At this stage of your career, you may not have mastered enough of the science of medicine. You will never do, but you are expected to spend the rest of your life trying. So why are we giving you the white coat and the stethoscope? It's because as of tomorrow you are starting your life as a physician-in-training. This is the highest title that you will achieve, and that

you should cherish. Do not be fooled by the titles of specialists that people will bestow on you in the future and that you will work so hard to acquire. Your success will depend on your ability to become and remain a perpetual student.

Aside from the Science, you will also have to learn the Art of Medicine that the white coat also symbolizes. Your patient is not a machine, and you are not simply a mechanic. The ethical principles of your practice may be just as thorny as the science behind it. Your patients have Human Rights:

They have the right to receive the best and most equitable medical care;

They have the right NOT to be harmed;

They have the right to dignity and confidentiality;

They have the right to be informed and to choose;

They have the right for a dignified life, and the right to die in dignity.

Unfortunately, only recently, medical schools have realized the importance of formal teaching of the Art of Medicine and the ethical obligations of their students. This is our promise to you.

Now, before taking the very important step of formally wearing the white, you have to make the pledge of the profession.