



WMU medical school's first group of students receive their 'white coats'

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Linda S. Mah | Imah@mlive.com By **Linda S. Mah | Imah@mlive.com**

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KALAMAZOO, MI — When the 54 students in the new Western Michigan University medical school put on the "white coats" of the medical profession, they must be careful to ensure that the uniform does not become a barrier between them and their patients.

The 54 students in the inaugural class of the new **Western Michigan University Homer Stryker M.D. School of Medicine** on Wednesday afternoon participated in the school's first White Coat Ceremony, in which medical students receive the traditional lab coats worn by doctors.

During the ceremony, keynote speaker Dr. Alan Shapiro, senior medical director of Community Pediatric Programs at **The Children's Hospital in Montefiore** in New York, spoke passionately about humanism and social justice in medicine and told the students that the white coat is a powerful symbol of the medical profession.

"You do not want the white coat to be a barrier, to put a space between you and your patients," Shapiro said. "When you put it on, you ask what do I want to represent to the people I'm seeing today. Is it a coat of armor that keeps them at arms distance, or is it a white, soft arm you can put a hand on?"

The white coat tradition began about 15 years ago and is now practiced at most medical schools in the United States and is sponsored by the Arnold P. Gold Foundation. It is an official welcome to the medical profession and it is a time to remind students of the relationships they must establish with their patients.

Dr. Hal Jenson, dean of the WMed school, said the ceremony helps set expectations for students to realize "the importance of caring as well as curing. We recognize humanism is a part of medicine."

The ceremony drew students and about 400 guests — faculty, community members and students' friends and family members. Prior to the ceremony, students met with their individual white coat sponsors, donors who bought the white lab coats, stethoscopes and surgical scrubs for the budding doctors.

Shapiro, who runs clinics for homeless youth and recently started a program called Terra Firma for immigrant children, said that as far back as Hippocrates, doctors have had a responsibility to combat social justice.

"We want you to also think about your work and how there are issues of inequality in the system that you're going

to come across really almost every day you work," he said. "We cannot be compassionate to our patients if they can't come into our door."

He urged them to find ways to insert humanism into their medical practices, to always be mindful of the need to treat patients and co-workers like equals. Patients, he warned, will contradict their doctors, and ignore their advice and repeat dangerous behaviors, and it is the doctor's responsibility to try to understand that behavior — not to judge it.

"The key to this is to practice non-judgment," Shapiro said. "Remember we're putting on a white coat, not a black robe."

The **medical school will hold its grand opening ceremony** for invited guests at 4 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 18 and a community open house from 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 20.

*Linda S. Mah is a reporter for the Kalamazoo Gazette. Reach her at 269-303-6567 or her at **lmah@mlive.com**. You can follow her on **Twitter**.*

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