Positive Change

By Erin Post

An innovative program helps Larner medical students find positive role models to forge their identities as physicians—so they can be fully present for their patients in the future.

When UVM Assistant Professor Nathalie Feldman, M.D., checks her email these days, she often finds herself scrolling through messages after message from physicians, staff, nurses, and other healthcare professionals offering heartfelt thanks for a professionalism accolade they have received from a medical student. Whether they are recognized for exceptional mentorship, thoughtful compassion for a patient, or a simple moment of kindness, the students’ words carry weight. Recipients are touched in profound ways, and faculty and residents, in particular, appreciate being acknowledged for their devotion to patient care and teaching.

“The expression of gratitude can have a profound positive effect,” Feldman says, as she ticks down through the hundreds of emails in a folder labeled “Responses to Professionalism Accolades.”

And then there’s the impact on students: When they sit down to write a note of thanks, they are making time to reflect on the traits and skills they want to develop. They’re prompted to think through the kind of doctor they want to be.

As the Larner College of Medicine’s director of the learning environment, Feldman is the architect of an innovative program to help medical students find positive role models as they forge their identities as physicians. Along with College-wide programs to emphasize wellness and care and teaching.

Uncovering the Hidden Curriculum

Medical schools revolve around curricula, syllabi and course objectives—all designed to make sure future doctors have extensive knowledge of the human body and the clinical skills to diagnose and treat patients. But there’s also the underlying lessons students absorb, ones that aren’t necessarily overt: the hidden curriculum. Feldman describes this as an “acculturation,” based in part on the subtle messages sent via the behavior of faculty and trainees.

Since it’s largely unspoken, the hidden curriculum can have an outsized impact. Students are less inclined to question what they’re learning, even if the dynamics they observe are unhealthy. For example, if a student sees a physician treating a nurse or a resident with disrespect, they may internalize the example being set. They may “question whether they belong,” says Feldman, or decide that they just “need to toughen up.” Feldman and colleagues across the College, including the Office of Diversity and Inclusion and the Learning Environment and Professionalism Committee (LEAP), want to create the space for students to talk about what they’re witnessing—the good and the bad.

“The learning environment efforts are really about dialogue across divides, whatever the divides might be,” she says.

A new, confidential, online reporting system streamlines how students communicate about learner mistreatment and offers various options for intervention, from anonymously reporting a concern, to meeting with Feldman or another faculty member to decide how to proceed, to, in the most serious cases, filing a report of harassment or discrimination directly with UVM’s Affirmative Action and Equal Opportunity Office. It’s important that the available options be easily accessible and as transparent as possible, Feldman says, so that students know where and how they can receive support.

The online system also includes a call for accolades. Students can write in praise for individuals who have “upheld the highest standards of professionalism.” Testimonials are shared anonymously with the recipient and their direct supervisor.

In addition, students reflect on professionalism through two new questions on course and clerkship evaluations. One offers students an opportunity to identify faculty members, residents or staff who are “exemplars of professionalism.” Feldman says the response rate continues to astound her—the large number of accolades is a testament to the impact of these positive role models.
Bridging the Divide

At least four generations—from the Baby Boomers to Generation Z—exist in the field of medicine, bringing with them a cornucopia of communication styles, work styles and expectations for others. And although there’s still much work to be done, trainees are the “most diverse, culturally and ethnically, that they have ever been,” says Feldman. In this environment, cultural humility—understanding the limits of your own perspective and being respectful of another person’s experience—is key. And fostering it requires connecting with others in meaningful ways.

One program aimed squarely at making space for honest exchange: Cup of Coffee Conversations, where community members have the opportunity to sit down with a trained peer to discuss a misunderstanding or non-communication. The model, first developed at Vanderbilt University’s Center for Patient and Professional Advocacy to address unprofessional behavior in hospital settings, is being adapted by the LEAP Committee for use in medical education. Although Feldman is always available to confidentially discuss issues regarding mistreatment, the Cup of Coffee Conversations allow trained peers to come together to engage in dialogue to resolve an issue in a non-punitive way. The peer-mediated model gives the involved parties the “power to be the change agent,” Feldman says. The pilot program recently expanded to include residents at UVM Medical Center, a novel innovation that the College plans to incorporate into orientation for first-year students. For faculty, Feldman and colleagues have hosted sessions for the Teaching Academy’s Medical Education Grand Rounds, featuring time to workshop feedback and a student panel focused on how faculty feedback affects them. Feldman and colleagues, including LEAP Committee member Judy Lewis, M.D., also seek to share insights with other institutions. A learning environment curriculum utilizing videos designed and created by Feldman, Lewis and colleagues has for several years been exporting the College’s approach to professionalism and the learning environment. The films—one focused on receiving and giving feedback, another on students and the other on faculty, staff and residents—depict instances of potential mistreatment. After viewing the films, students should help dig deeper into meaningful ways.

Statement on Professionalism

Our Larner College of Medicine community upholds the highest standards of professionalism as we follow our passion for lifelong learning and improvement. We demonstrate professionalism through integrity, accountability, compassion, altruism, and social responsibility. We honor the trust our society has placed in us as stewards of the art and science of medicine, relying on cultural humility, kindness, and respect to guide our daily interactions. We expect all members of our community to embrace these principles of professionalism as we strive to conduct and support patient care, research, and education that are second to none.

“A Culture of Humility and Respect”

Statement created under the direction of Dean Richard L. Page, M.D., underscores the UVM Larner College of Medicine’s approach to professionalism. After a 12-member task force created the statement with input from faculty, staff and students, the community came together to celebrate the statement’s launch. "Professionalism must be a core value of educators, scientists, caregivers, and all those who work in medicine and science," says Dean Page. "Because of medicine’s great importance in people’s lives—often literally sustaining them—that power has to be handled responsibly, and with humility."
Alums Publish Paper on Footwear and Parkinson’s Disease

Alums Ross Sayadi, M.D.,’17 (pictured at left) and Mustafa Chopan, M.D.,’17 (pictured at right) are co-authors on a paper published in NeuroRehabilitation that focuses on the challenges patients with Parkinson’s disease face regarding footwear. A majority of the patients they surveyed—64 percent—reported “experiencing difficulties wearing shoes on their own,” as the progressive nervous system disorder affects fine motor control and balance. A shoe prototype the team developed uses magnets instead of laces, allowing patients to wear dress shoes “without having to fight the heel,” said Sayadi in an Instagram post about their publication. Sayadi and Chopan began their work on the shoe prototype as medical students, inspired by Sayadi’s father, who was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease in his 30s. Sayadi is a plastic surgery resident at University of California-Irvine. Chopan is a plastic and reconstructive surgery resident at University of Florida.

Sayadi and Chopan began their work on the shoe prototype as medical students, inspired by Sayadi’s father, who was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease in his 30s.

College to Host Sculpture by Kate Pond

A sculpture that once graced the grounds of the University of Vermont will be returning to campus thanks to the generosity of former director of admissions Kathleen Gleeson, Ph.D., and UVM Professor Emeritus of Molecular Physiology and Biophysics David Maughan, Ph.D. Titled “Five and Eight,” by renowned Vermont sculptor Kate Pond, the painted steel work of art features “open curves” that add “lightness and whimsy” and “welcome people to relax within the sculpture.” Pond created “Five and Eight” in 1978. It has been exhibited at Skidmore College, Castleton University, and Wood Art Gallery in Montpelier. It was also previously displayed at UVM outside of the Royal Tyler Theater. With planned construction of the Firestone Research Building, Gleeson and Maughan saw the opportunity to enhance the College of Medicine green space with their beloved pieces. Gleeson retired as an associate professor of family medicine in 2003; Maughan was granted emeritus status in 2009.

Delivering Truck Raises Awareness for UVM Cancer Center

The delivery truck for Ashley Homestore and the Superstore in Williston, VT… has gone pink for a good cause. Business owners David Powell and Steve Kidder offered up the outside of the vehicle to raise awareness for Steps to Wellness, an oncology rehabilitation program of the UVM Cancer Center. The campaign honors Kidder’s sister-in-law, Cynthia Cardillo, who died from breast cancer in 2017 and was a champion for increasing awareness around the importance of 3D mammograms for women with dense breast tissue. Kidder’s three stores, including Novello Furniture in Barre, VT… also hosted in-store fundraisers in the fall of 2019 that raised approximately $5,800 for the UVM Cancer Center and its programming.

Over the past 40 years, he and wife Holly, contributed over $40 million to Vermont nonprofits, including their donation of property valued at $13 million to UVM Medical Center.

Contact the UVM Lerner College of Medicine Development News Office at (802) 656-4014 or medical.giving@uvm.edu.