

# Ochsner Clinical School Students Speak the Language of Virtues

**Lisa M. Tompkins, JD**

Institute of Medicine, Education, and Spirituality at Ochsner, Ochsner Clinic Foundation, New Orleans, LA

In 1973, I entered the Ochsner surgical technician training program, desiring an interesting way to support myself through college. As a surgical tech, I witnessed firsthand the psychic toll lawsuits take on physicians. After college, I went to law school, intending to defend Ochsner and its physicians, which I did for 33 years. The most rewarding part of my job was the “counselor”-at-law role, assisting physicians as they dealt with difficult patients and counseling/befriending doctors through the sometimes heart-wrenching aftermath of learning they committed a mistake that hurt someone.

In recent years, I have watched physicians retire whom I have known for years, some since their early practices and some since training. What I’ve noticed is that some loved their careers until the end, and others were burned out and couldn’t wait to leave medicine. I contemplated whether those physicians who loved the practice of medicine to the end had anything in common other than good patient satisfaction scores, which they all had. I came to the conclusion that those who retired still loving medicine had somehow managed to throw themselves into their practices with open hearts, deeply caring about their patients, while still maintaining good boundaries. They were able to have the hard conversations with patients, and they knew how to speak truthfully about difficult situations and to disclose their mistakes to a trusted listener. I decided that when I retired, I wanted to do something to assist young physicians to learn skills that might help them avoid burnout—to love the practice of medicine all the way until retirement.

In January 2011, I retired from the Ochsner Department of Legal Affairs, and in November 2011, I had the privilege of meeting Father Anthony DeConciliis, vice president of the Institute of Medicine, Education, and Spirituality at Ochsner (IMESO), who listened eagerly to my desire to be of service to young physicians. He agreed that something needed to be offered and thought that using the virtues as a foundation would be a great way to start. Father Anthony believed that without the ability to self-reflect, which requires a working knowledge of the virtues, physicians cannot practice in a

way that gives meaning to their lives and practices and helps to prevent burnout.

With the primary goal of helping to teach young physicians the skill and discipline of self-reflection, Father Anthony and I spent many hours developing a course that we believed would encourage physicians to identify meaning in their personal and professional lives. We decided to focus on the virtues of courage, gratitude, temperance, humanity, transcendence, justice, and wisdom, using self-reflection and experiential learning to teach these virtues to our medical students in The University of Queensland School of Medicine, Ochsner Clinical School program. One doubting physician leader told us that we could not “ever expect to hear physicians use the word ‘courage’ in a sentence.” Father Anthony and I had great hope that our work would prove otherwise, and I believe it has.

We call our course “A New Language for the New Physician,” and we have now offered it 6 times as part of the Medicine in Society rotation. I am deeply humbled by the responses of the medical students. Not only do they use the word “courage” in a sentence, but at the end of only 5 days, words like “fear” and “doubt” and “humanity” and even “transcendence” almost roll off their tongues! Students have told us that they do not recall ever being in a space where they could speak so honestly without fear of humiliation or retaliation. We watch the students develop skills of self-reflection and compassion over the course of only 5 days. We watch them learn to identify things in their days for which to be grateful and to see how that gratitude actually produces still more things for which to be grateful. At the end of the rotation, students report that their ability to identify the presence and absence of virtues in medicine has actually changed the way they practice.

I am honored and feel most privileged to be part of this program. I have well-grounded optimism for these students and cannot wait to see the lives they will live and the impact they will have on the lives of their patients.