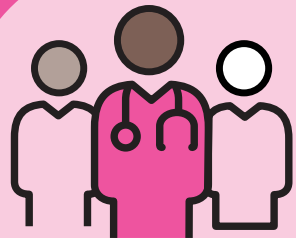




# Bringing Character to Life: Virtues in Medicine

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AIDAN THOMPSON  
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*with*  
DR FELICITY CORCORAN



# Introduction

The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues has sought to explore the place of character and virtues in professional education and practice through its 'Virtues in the Professions' research (2012–2020).

To date, the research has engaged more than 3,500 participants, across first year undergraduate students, graduates, and professionals with at least five years' of experience. The research considered the virtues important to teachers, doctors, lawyers, nurses, and business professionals, and emphasised the moral character and virtues of a person over any ethical duties or rules that are prescribed by a regulatory body. The research has considered each profession in its own right, as well as looking across the data for comparisons and contrasts between the professions.

and enact the virtues in the workplace that resonate with their personal life. In prioritising professional moral development, doctors can provide medical expertise in a way that prioritises patient wellbeing. The application of the findings to the workplace will be enhanced with a reflection from a leading authority in the field. It is hoped that those engaging with this publication will gain practical and actionable take-aways that will enrich their working lives by contributing to their professional purpose and sense of vocational flourishing.

Bringing Character to Life



The research has engaged students, lecturers, practitioners and regulatory and organisational bodies in reprioritising virtues in the training and practice of professionals. This booklet considers the practice of virtue in the medical profession, summarises the key research findings, and looks at how and where virtue is being embedded in practice, or where more can be done.

The research that underpins this booklet is drawn from 549 pre- and in-service medical doctors and medical school educators. The aim of this booklet is to highlight the importance of developing professionals' abilities to authentically display

*'Ethics and rules are distinct principles, but go hand in hand in the daily life of any doctor. As a very junior doctor, I would be involved in a number of tasks in which my opinion was always sought, but ultimately a more senior doctor would hold the responsibility to make ethical and professional judgements. Now that I am a consultant, that responsibility lies with me. I have found that as my responsibility has increased throughout my career, it has become far easier to assess the ethical considerations, medical realities and 'the rule book' in tandem with each other, in order to provide the very best standard of patient care.'*

**Dr Felicity Corcoran,  
Consultant Anaesthetist**

# Character and Virtues in Medicine

A traditional conception of a 'good' professional includes requisite technical competencies for the field **and** excellences of character, required for sound ethical decision-making (Carr, 2018).

Character encompasses positive emotional, behavioural and cognitive habits that motivate and foster human excellence (Kristjánsson, 2015). Virtues reflect intrinsically and morally good qualities that help guide ethically sound decisions and actions; examples include honesty, modesty and kindness.

Research by the Jubilee Centre has found that little attention has been paid to character in medicine, and that the moral virtues that medical professionals are required to adopt have been neglected in recent years. Yet, there remains an inherent interest in reinvigorating these for personal and professional good, both by regulatory bodies and by pre- and in-service professionals themselves.

Whilst people are moved to pursue a career in medicine because of intellectual curiosity and to exercise autonomous judgement in providing the best medical care for a patient, doctors in the Jubilee Centre research found that the pressures of their working environment prevented them from living out these virtues at work.

Research conducted by the Jubilee Centre in 2012–2015 asked 549 pre- and in-service doctors to rank the strengths of character that they value the most, with regards to themselves, and to the 'ideal' doctor. Participants were also given a series of moral dilemmas to respond to, and asked to justify their actions by way of sound reasoning.

## Honesty



Honesty emerged as the top-ranked virtue among doctors. As with many other professions, honesty and integrity underpin the duties of any doctor, as set out in the GMC Code of Conduct. All doctors must display honesty and integrity in every facet of their professional practice, be it in their communications with patients or colleagues, in public communications, in compiling reports or signing documents, or when giving evidence in Court or before a tribunal.

Unlike medical knowledge and procedure, however, honesty and integrity are not 'taught' skills. Rather, they are personal character traits that anybody intending to pursue a career as a doctor must possess. Without honesty and integrity in the profession, lives will be put at risk and improvements to working practice will never be made.

**Dr Felicity Corcoran,**  
**Consultant Anaesthetist**

## The importance of virtue in medicine



Healthcare environments are frequently characterised by morally complex and emotionally charged situations for patients, families and professionals. Promoting a virtuous approach to care in medicine can empower doctors to not only treat the all-important physical healing of patients with wisdom and judgement, but also encourage doctors to practise with moral purpose.



Pre-service doctors at the beginning of their studies tend to have strong moral reasons for wanting to enter the medical profession. Yet, by the time they enter the profession, this moral purpose is overtaken by a desire to adhere to rules and codes in line with formal professional requirements.



The undergraduate medical ethics curriculum is predominantly focussed on rules-based approaches to decision-making regarding treatment and patient care. Medical education should provide opportunities for pre-service doctors to develop their professional character through learning more about other ethical theories, such as virtue ethics.

## Barriers to virtue at work



Medical students and junior doctors were preoccupied with the best way to practice medicine, with the focus mainly being on clinical skills. Any focus on character and virtue, with regards professional practice, were less obvious to students, and considered part of the 'hidden curriculum' of medical education.



Where rules and principles currently dominate medical regulations, space should be created to allow doctors to practice virtuously, with good judgment, when interpreting guidelines. At present, this is only given attention when standards and behaviours fall foul of regulations, rather than in supporting virtuous medical practice.



Workload targets and managerial pressures can negatively impact the levels of support that doctors receive from their colleagues. An overemphasis on bureaucracy and tasks that take doctors away from treating and caring for patients, that are enforced from the top down, can cloud doctors' judgement from practising virtuously.

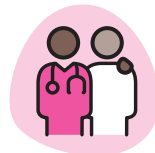
## Supporting organisational virtue



Teamwork was a prominent virtue championed by experienced doctors, who felt it to be of immense value in dealing with workplace challenges such as those linked to working autonomously. Teamwork enables collaborative problem solving and professional judgement, as well as the pooling of expertise in the provision of patient care.



The development of 'good' character leads to the ability to practice with wisdom and judgement. Experience and judgement allow one to recognise diversity of circumstances and situations, and for doctors to be thoughtful and decisive in their actions. Opportunities to enable the development of good professional character should be celebrated and encouraged.



Supportive colleagues provide an important framework for doctors to meet the complex demands of their role, as well as vital opportunities to share experiences. Working with supportive colleagues and being supportive of others creates a more authentic environment for doctors to express their character at work.

## Can a focus on virtuous medical practice help reinforce the moral reasons that doctors chose to enter the profession?



*'In my experience, and particularly at a time when I am working on the front line in the midst of a global health emergency, professional virtues possessed by doctors such as honesty, integrity and fairness have never been stronger. Never before has my professional judgment been tested to such a degree, particularly at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic when we were faced with a new disease*

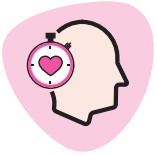
*for which there were no 'rule books,' no textbooks, and no previous knowledge of how to treat each patient that passed through our hospital doors.*

*Ultimately, no good doctor enters their training, and subsequently their practice, for status or financial reward. Rather, they do so simply to make a difference to every patient they meet and to society as a whole.*

*The COVID-19 pandemic has, I believe, given many doctors a fresh appreciation of why they chose to become doctors in the first place. When the dust settles, I have no doubt that those professional virtues will have been reinforced in every practitioner to the great benefit of future patients.'*

**Dr Felicity Corcoran,  
Consultant Anaesthetist**

## Supporting professional virtue



Character strengths are not fully developed at the time one enters the medical profession. Through meaningful role modelling and developing a caring and supportive culture and environment, the workplace can be a vital formative space for junior doctors' character development.



Collaboration and collegiality should be emphasised and fostered among doctors of all career stages. This often involves informal support such as mentoring, where junior doctors can gain invaluable insight from senior consultants acting as role models, but can also work to allow junior doctors to feedback to more senior colleagues in supportive ways.

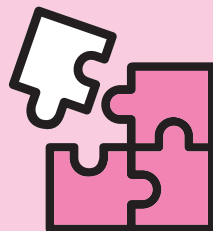


In addition to making the 'hidden curriculum' of character development more explicit in medical education, creating cultures where doctors feel that character development is valued in the workplace is important for virtuous medical practice.

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**Dr Felicity Corcoran, Consultant Anaesthetist**





### **Why do you find it easier to make ethical decisions as a consultant than when you were a junior doctor in your early career stages?**

Continuous professional training and accumulation of professional experience have no doubt played their part in finding it easier to make ethical decisions at work. I have found that the level of responsibility I now hold, and the thought processes I need to follow to reach a decision, make it easier to make pressured judgement calls with regards the very best patient care than when I was assisting more senior doctors very early in my career.

### **Is effective team working between doctors important for virtuous professional practice?**

There is no doubt that working during the global COVID-19 pandemic has emphasised the importance of teamwork in doctors, not just within our own departments or hospitals, but across the world. Ultimately, every doctor in the world can learn, and is learning, something new from another doctor in another country, who they have never met or spoken to. We are all going through the same thing and are determined to work together directly and indirectly.

## *Final Comment*

*'I believe that character and ethics in medicine are best brought to life in an open working environment that encourages shared learning and continuous development. As with any profession, medicine is extremely complex. Sometimes, indeed often, there are no right or wrong answers. Judgements need to be made by people who work long hours (particularly during the pandemic), at anti-social hours of the day, with time running against them, and when it is a person's life at stake, rather than money or property.*

*'Any ethical practice will therefore be founded upon a supportive working atmosphere that has no "blame culture" or such thing as a "stupid question" but has at its heart a group of colleagues who are encouraged to share knowledge in the best interests of each patient.'*

**Dr Felicity Corcoran,  
Consultant Anaesthetist**

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