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FREE EXPRESSION

# Med Schools Are Over Their Politics Fever

Students aren't swearing to uproot 'structural violence' anymore. They're taking the Hippocratic Oath.

By Sally Satel

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The University of Minnesota Medical School's annual White Coat Ceremony for the class of 2026.

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Medical schools are under scrutiny. In April, Harvard Medical School released a [report](#) from its “Open Inquiry Working Group” calling for a culture of free discussion. The report described an environment where a substantial fraction of faculty are reluctant to discuss controversial topics in medicine and public health and where social activism distracts from the

medical mission. In May, after a year-long [investigation](#), the Justice Department issued findings alleging that the Yale School of Medicine had intentionally discriminated against white and Asian applicants.

For many years, I've [chronicled](#) the intrusion of social justice imperatives into my psychiatry profession and the threat it poses to patient care. Percolating during the 2000s, the trend surged fiercely after the death of George Floyd on May 25, 2020, at the hands of Minneapolis policeman Derek Chauvin.

Recall, for example, the Covid-era [exhortation](#) from a Johns Hopkins epidemiologist that we all march to protest Floyd's death even though gathering for other causes was deemed too dangerous. There was also an [open letter](#) signed by 1,200 health and medical colleagues urging "to respond to protesters demands in the name of public health."

Then there was the University of Pittsburgh [cardiologist](#) who was banned from teaching trainees because he published an article (later retracted as part of his punishment) that criticized affirmative action in medicine. Next two professors at Harvard Medical School [called](#) for race-based "reparations" as part of an "antiracist" agenda for medicine. The American Medical Association's 2024-2025 strategic [plan](#) for health equity urged physicians to "confront inequities and dismantle white supremacy, racism, and other forms of exclusion and structured oppression." In the first year of the Israel-Hamas war, physicians [chanted](#) "long live intifada!" on hospital grounds at the University of California, San Francisco.

What does all this mean for the roughly [23,000](#) medical students who are starting school this summer? Are their new black bags already bulging with social justice ideology?

To get a feel for the climate, I looked at what took place on the first day of medical school, a day when students around the country participate in a formal induction called the [White Coat Ceremony](#). The rites were popularized in 1993 by the late Arnold P. Gold, a pediatric neurologist at

Columbia University, who [worried](#) that medical students were “losing their connection to the patients themselves.”

At the ceremonies, students sit in the first rows of their school’s auditorium, white coats folded in their laps, and are called one by one to the stage to be “cloaked” by a senior faculty member. The ceremonies close with the white-coated students reciting a variant of the Hippocratic Oath, written between the 3rd and 5th centuries B.C., and sometimes penned by the students themselves.

In 2022, students at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities campus recited their own written [oath](#). They called their white coats a “[symbol](#) of power, prestige and dominance,” spoke of “uprooting the legacy and perpetuation of structural violence deeply embedded within the health care system” and pledged to “honor all indigenous ways of healing that have been historically marginalized by Western medicine.” The same summer, many medical students at the University of Michigan Medical School stood up and [walked out](#) of their ceremony during an address by a pro-life OB-GYN physician.

Four years later, what do the oaths say? Based on an informal sampling of ceremonies this summer and last, I was generally heartened.

New students at Ohio State’s College of Medicine recited a traditional [oath](#), closing with the recognition “that medical education is a lifelong commitment that only begins today” and their choice “to accept the high standards of honesty and integrity to which society will hold us accountable.”

Students at Emory hewed close to the [original](#) Hippocratic creed. They did everything but “swear by Apollo Physician” as they [promised](#) that “whatever house I enter I will go into it for the benefit of the sick.”

At Penn State, the new class of 2030 [recited](#) the Oath of Modern Hippocrates, [written](#) in 1964 by Louis Lasagna, the academic dean of the School of Medicine at Tufts University. University of Arizona students [undertook](#) to maintain the core values of the College of Medicine and

received stethoscopes as a symbol of human touch. West Virginia University students “solemnly” swore by whatever they held “most sacred” that they would be “loyal to the profession of medicine.”

Harvard’s incoming class committed “to nurture my passion for life-long learning.” While some jargon crept in, as they vowed to treat patients “in a trauma-informed, culturally safe and contextually tailored manner” and use their “voice and skills to dismantle systemic barriers to care,” the students also assured the public that they would “support you and your loved ones with humility, compassion and respect.”

At the Washington University School of Medicine, students committed “to practicing humility, remembering that I am a lifelong student” and promised “to anchor myself in the humanity I share with my patients so that I may find joy in healing.”

This summer, no one at the University of Michigan Medical School walked out. Their affirmation was briefer than most but hit the right notes of humility and excellence in education and patient care.

Finally, I revisited the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities and found students embracing “the tradition of Hippocrates” and viewing “the tools of my profession to be knowledge, compassion and patience.”

These covenants signify that being a doctor requires the same values it always did. I hope that we may be in the early stages of returning academic medicine to its native calling in which patients come before politics.

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