

CORRESPONDENCE

Reclaiming the Heart of Medicine

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To the Editor—I had lunch recently with a friend whose son is a biology major at a university here in North Carolina. Her son is bright, idealistic, and pursuing a pre-med track because, as he told his mom, he wants to help people.

My friend smiled, then admitted she was worried about her son. Many of the doctors in their life, people who once held the same ideals, have quietly advised him to reconsider. *Don't do it*, they've said. *It's not what you think it is*. Her son is undeterred so far, but as a mother, she worries that he will lose the idealism that inspired him to pursue medicine.

That conversation brought me back to my own childhood. My late father was a pediatrician in Charlotte, North Carolina. He practiced before the corporatization of medicine, when decisions were driven by relationships more than revenue. I remember him taking calls at all hours, rushing to the hospital in his worn trench coat, always ready to care for a sick child. The work was demanding, but back then it felt more human.

This isn't a call to return to a romanticized past. Health care today is more complex, more regulated, and more technologically advanced than ever. But for many clinicians, it's also more fragmented, more impersonal, and more exhausting. The question we have to ask is this: How can we preserve the heart of medicine in a system that too often seems to erode it?

Burnout and moral injury are symptoms of a deeper fracture, one that affects not just physicians but the story of medicine itself. When a profession built on compassion becomes a corporate machine, even the most dedicated can begin to feel disillusioned.

Of course, meaningful reform requires change at every level: policy, payment, access, education, and patient engagement. But even as we work toward those larger shifts, we can't ignore the places where we do have influence. The culture of an organization, the quality of its communication, and its clarity of purpose may not solve every structural challenge, but they shape how people experience the work. These are the human levers we can pull now, starting in every clinic, hospital, and training program.

My father believed in the power of his profession to heal—not just bodies, but lives. It’s a legacy worth carrying forward. It’s still worth fighting for.

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