

A Raconteur of a Certain Age Presents Her Thoughts on the Symbolism of the Physician's White Coat

Jane Knapp, M.D.

From the University of Missouri School of Medicine 2026 White Coat Ceremony.

Dr. Jane Knapp presented the keynote address for the 2026 White Coat Ceremony hosted by the University of Missouri School of Medicine on July 31st, 2026. Each year, the newly admitted cohort of medical students are presented with a MU-branded white coat by School of Medicine leadership, and swear to honor the Declaration of Geneva, a modern version of the Hippocratic Oath.

In her keynote speech, Dr. Knapp discusses the symbol of the physician's white coat, and the responsibilities each medical student carries when they wear it.

Introductory Remarks from Associate Dean Nathan Buecke

It gives me great pleasure to introduce Dr. Jane Knapp, this year's White Coat Ceremony keynote speaker.

Dr. Jane Knapp received her B.S. in Pharmacy from University of Missouri-Kansas City in 1974. In 1978 she graduated from the University of Missouri School of Medicine with her doctorate of medicine. As a medical student, Dr. Knapp was a member of the AOA (Alpha Omega Alpha) Medical Honor Society and was awarded the American Medical Women's Association Award for Academic Achievement. She then went on and completed her pediatric residency and her pediatric emergency medicine fellowship at Children's Mercy Hospital and Clinics in Kansas City, Missouri. She was one of the first physicians in the US to be fellowship trained in Pediatric Emergency Medicine.

In her over forty-year career, she has served multiple roles in the Children's Mercy Hospital within the University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Medicine. Various roles include; Director of Pediatric Emergency Medicine Fellowship Program, Director of Graduate Medical Education, Professor of Pediatrics, and Associate Dean for the UMKC School of Medicine.

Throughout her career, Dr. Knapp has been

awarded multiple awards, including the Citation of Merit from our School of Medicine for her service, research, and teaching. She has served on professional, medical school, and hospital committees, and is well published within the field of pediatrics.

We are grateful to have her with us today.

Dr. Jane Knapp: The Symbolism of the Physician's White Coat

Let me start with a tale of two quarterbacks. I'm from Kansas City and a Chiefs fan so the two quarterbacks are Len Dawson and Patrick Mahomes - the Chiefs two Super Bowl quarterbacks. When they first met, Len Dawson, reminiscing, famously said to Patrick Mahomes, "I was young once". In this story I am Len Dawson and you are Patrick Mahomes. I am looking back at my career and you are looking forward. Looking back, medical school was a major turning point in my life. And that's my first symbol of the white coat - it is a turning point - as you dedicate your career to medicine. It's one that will challenge you in ways you have never been challenged before.

It's been 52 years since I was in your shoes - over that time the science of medicine has moved forward in powerful and innovative ways. On even a cursory review, my career and the one you embark on today are separated by seismic changes in medicine and society. Consider the unraveling of the human genome and gene therapy, immunotherapy and targeted therapy with monoclonal antibodies, the landmark Institute of Medicine reports - To Err is Human and Crossing the Quality Chasm, leaps in technology, the internet, social media, and sadly, with changes in public policy and attitudes-something I never thought I would see - the resurgence of vaccine preventable diseases.

In medical education we have seen the implementation of duty hours and the development and incorporation of simulation. In 1974 when I entered medical school, AI was science fiction. Now, Bill Gates is quoted as saying that in 10 years AI will replace many doctors. Essays, debates and opinions on the role of AI in medicine abound. Some physicians already use it as scribes. Certainly AI will find a place in medicine. Whether it will replace us is up to you.

So, given all the changes and what's on the horizon for an incoming class of M-1's like you, I

asked myself what can I say about the symbolism of the white coat that you will find relevant? Well, I have heard it said that the future is speculation, the present is now, and the past is history, experience and hindsight. And they always say hindsight is 20/20. That's what I have to offer.

While medical education may look different than it did 52 years ago, it is my belief that medical principles enshrined since the time of William Osler and even back to Hippocrates remain relevant. I'm going to share my thoughts on 5 of them that symbolize the white coat you are receiving today. They represent the fundamentals of the principles and practice of medicine.

Number one. The white coat is a symbol of the laying on of hands. Nothing can replace the human touch. Examining a patient is a privilege and I believe an important basic skill. The development of physical examination skills comes with perfection of technique and repetition. That process begins in medical school. One of the best ways to know when a physical finding is abnormal is from seeing hundreds of normal ones. As a resident at Children's Mercy, even in a busy ER, we did a systems exam on every child, by that I mean head, ears, throat, chest, abdomen, genitalia and extremities. Why? Because we didn't know what kind of medical care the child had received in the past, if any. And you never knew what you were going to find totally unrelated to their chief complaint. I'll never forget seeing a child with an undiagnosed retinoblastoma tumor of the eye. I saw a white pupil on exam. I said to myself that could be a retinoblastoma and it was. The point is you have the opportunity to learn from each and every patient - each and every physical exam - and your exam can make a difference in someone's life.

Number two. That white coat is a symbol of an expert history taker. Learn how to talk to people, probe for more information and discover that a large part of history taking is listening. As students, we were frequently admonished never to write in the chart, yes we were writing in a paper chart, that the patient was a poor historian. As the axiom went there are no poor historians only poor history takers. That was so indelibly imprinted on my brain that when I was having a hard time talking to a patient or parent I used to say that to myself and try a little harder.

Number three. For you, for your patients, that white coat is a symbol of the TRUST that is the bedrock of the patient-physician relationship. Patients trust you to be honest, competent,

professional and to do the right thing. Once you've lost trust it is difficult if not impossible to regain. Maintaining your personal health and professionalism is part of that trust and of the utmost importance. I was president of the medical staff at Children's Mercy at age 39. Later, I was a member of the executive committee of the American Board of Pediatrics. I was the chair of Graduate Medical Education at Children's Mercy for 11 years. Along with our own residents and fellows we had visiting students and residents in family medicine, surgery, anesthesia, pathology, radiology you name it working and rotating through our hospital. In all of those roles, I have had experience with hundreds of physicians - some in difficult situations. We are all human with all the problems humans face. Seek help when you need it. Mistakes will be made. I've seen unprofessional behavior, pride and ego endanger, shorten or ruin many a career. On the flip side however, I've seen many careers saved and go on to prosper with help. It's worth saying again - seek and accept help when you need it.

Number four. Your white coat is the symbol of a teacher, communicator and team leader. When I read my talk to my siblings they gave me the most feedback concerning communication. For the patient, for the family members, for members of your health care team you are the teacher. As CS Lewis reflected, we need to speak the language of the audience. For example, sit, make eye contact and explain diagnoses and treatments, with words your patients can understand. Remember they are hearing what you are saying maybe for the first time. They may be in denial or shock. Don't make assumptions, ask if they understand, do they have questions. Involve them in decision making. Think about finishing with the question - is there anything else?

Lastly, number five. See that white coat as your duty to relieve pain. Physical, emotional, and spiritual. Of course, physical pain should be addressed promptly and completely. We haven't always done that well. Over the last 50 years we have achieved a better understanding of pain. Myths about pain have been debunked. The science has advanced and treating pain is a priority. However, beyond physical pain, this is about humanism in medicine - remember that a short amount of your time and words of kindness and compassion go a long way. Along the way of your medical career, if it has hasn't happened already, you will probably be on

what I call, the other side of medicine. That is, as a patient, or a relative of a patient. It happened to me at age 40 when I was diagnosed with breast cancer. With that experience you will gain empathy for what another human being is going through and be a better doctor for it. Your most important patient is the one you are caring for at that moment. Give them your full attention and treat them with dignity and respect.

Let me finish by saying thank-you for the honor of listening to my thoughts today. Congratulations to all of you for what you have accomplished already and my best wishes for your continued success. I still cherish my memories of medical school. Even in the 70's, the curriculum was demanding and intense. The expectations were high. But the reward was to become a member of a noble, respected, healing profession. Being a doctor of medicine is a responsibility but also a privilege that I hope you enjoy for the rest of your life. So, receive your white coat and say the words of the oath you will take today not as a ritual but with conviction and purpose.