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**A**ction speaks louder than words  
but not nearly as often.  
—Mark Twain

As we bid farewell to one class and place white coats on another pride of aspiring physicians, I want here to share some comments I made during a recent commencement at my own medical school alma mater. These were my thoughts: Taking a cue from Mark Twain, I encourage all of us, especially newly minted doctors and scientists, to be mindful of how we use words and to realize the potency they can have. I acknowledge my bias. I see myself a word-smith, long engaged in creative writing and literature and, as you might expect, in the reporting of research.

First, please remember that modern health care is not just about patient-physician interactions. Nurses, physician assistants, radiology technicians, psychologists, respiratory therapists, and other staff are, of course, critical to excellent care. As a team, you can't recapitulate the Tower of Babel in your dealings with one another. Rather, you will need to adopt a shared and respectful language if you hope to establish common patient-care goals, resolve conflicts, and build consensus.

In terms of caring for our patients, our utterances can be as powerful as many drugs and as penetrating as our extraordinarily sophisticated modern imaging tools.

Carefully chosen words may enable you to get Mr. Smith to reveal, reluctantly, that he's taking his blood pressure medicine only every other day because the price is too high for his fixed income. Carefully chosen words may enable you to not only motivate a particularly stubborn patient with emphysema to finally give up smoking but also challenge all of your patients to assume a measure of personal responsibility for their health—to think about prevention before treatment becomes necessary. The right words will also help you convey heartfelt sympathy when medicine and technology have run their course, and there is nothing left for you to do but offer your humanism to a dying patient and that patient's family.

Easier said than done, you may be thinking. Whether you intend to spend your days in medicine as a physician, a scientist, or both, you will need to navigate yourself and others through substantial challenges—probably not infrequently. Some advice to the newbies from a veteran:

Be a poet! Choose innovative and imaginative words as you wrestle with a particularly perplexing diagnosis or the latest setback in your study. Such words will help you articulate, to yourself, innovative and imaginative alternatives and strengthen your conviction that you have chosen those alternatives well.

Choose fearless words, especially in the face of seemingly insurmountable hurdles and risks. Your own gentle and firm response confirming a frightening diagnosis, for example, can serve as a steady hand to a patient's family, helping them summon the fortitude and courage to face the adversity ahead.

Choose words like "how" and "why" that can lead to probing or challenging questions. The difference between good medical science and great medical science is often in the quality of the questions asked. Expect answers beyond the routine, beyond the current paradigms. As Annie Dillard observed, "If we were to judge nature by common sense or likelihood, we wouldn't believe the world existed."

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