

A Return to Humanism in Healthcare

Human-centered care is a focus of many healthcare systems and corporations as the medical industry navigates ongoing pandemic-related workplace challenges.

In the past few decades, healthcare has undergone a shift from private physician-owned practices to medical offices being integrated into large health systems.

Health networks have many benefits such as streamlined care, increased patient access, and collaboration between doctors. However, despite the benefits of health networks, as systems have expanded, clinicians' intentionality toward patient care has decreased. Individualized and human-centered patient care has been at times neglected due to the advent of large healthcare systems.

Healthcare industry professionals are also facing many challenges that impact their ability to provide the best possible care to patients. Clinicians continue to experience the impacts of the pandemic, citing burnout, emotional distress, and fatigue that interfere in the workplace with caregiving ability.

The Arnold P. Gold Foundation and Henry Schein recently hosted a virtual webinar addressing humanism in healthcare, titled "Post-Pandemic Future – Why Humanism in Healthcare Matters," featuring the following panelists:

- › **Richard Levin**, M.D., President and Chief Executive Officer of The Arnold P. Gold Foundation.
- › **Allison Neale**, MPP, Member Chair of the Gold Corporate Council; Vice President of Public Policy at Henry Schein; and Managing Director of the Henry Schein Cares Foundation.
- › **Olapeju Simoyan**, M.D., BDS, MPH, Gold Humanism Honor Society member; Medical Director of New Directions Treatment Services; and Professor in the Department of Psychiatry at Drexel University College of Medicine, and board-certified in family medicine and addiction medicine.



Richard Levin



Allison Neale



Olapeju Simoyan



Reed V. Tuckson

› **Reed V. Tuckson, M.D., FACP**, Former Trustee of the Gold Foundation; Managing Director of Tuckson Health Connections, LLC; Founder of the Black Coalition Against COVID-19; Co-Founder of the Coalition for Trust in Health & Science; and member of Henry Schein’s Board of Directors.

The Arnold P. Gold Foundation was founded in 1988 to sustain and elevate the human connection in healthcare. The nonprofit organization began its work as a change agent in the medical education space, and then extended into nursing education and healthcare in practice. In 2017, the Gold Foundation brought together corporate healthcare leaders, including Henry Schein, to create the Gold Corporate Council (GCC). The independent companies on the council support the Gold Foundation’s mission of humanism in healthcare through both collaborative efforts and their own policies and initiatives. Henry Schein was one of the founding members and has helped expand the Gold Foundation’s mission into the corporate sector.

According to the Gold Foundation, humanistic care emphasizes the elements of compassion, collaboration, and scientific excellence in healthcare when working with and treating a patient, as well as working with colleagues. A clinician who considers humanistic care in their practice understands that the entire healthcare journey is unique to each individual. Reintroducing the human aspect of care within the medical industry reminds medical staff to focus on the interpersonal aspect of healthcare and to focus on taking care of people and their well-being

first. According to the Gold Foundation, humanism emphasizes human interests, values, and dignity at the center of all healthcare operations.

Human-centered healthcare

Clinicians have long experienced barriers to providing care, and the pandemic heightened the already present challenges. The healthcare worker shortage, administrative tasks, technology challenges, and disease transmission from COVID-19 have made humanistic care increasingly more difficult to implement day to day within medical practices.

“At every single step, when that individual enters the healthcare ecosystem, there’s an opportunity for a relationship that drives people to start and maintain positive health changes.”

– Allison Neale, MPP

“On average, doctors work twice as long on administrative tasks like the electronic health record as they do with patients. Thirty years ago, most doctors owned their own practices and set their time and priorities as patient circumstances demanded. Now, most doctors are employees of huge health systems,” said Dr. Levin.

It is necessary within the healthcare industry to address healthcare workers’ concerns so employees can provide exceptional patient care. The Gold Humanism Honor Society (GHHS) was started in 2002 with that goal in mind and has grown over the years to more than 45,000 members and 180 chapters, recognizing the health organizations that value humanism within their practices. According to GHHS, the peer-nominated honor society “reinforces and supports the importance of human

connection in healthcare, which is essential to patients and clinicians.”

Dr. Simoyan discussed how we must recognize the importance of humanism in healthcare, in this national crisis in healthcare and always.

“It is important for us to have self-compassion. It is beyond the individual level and is going to require changes on a system level, as well, to say we’re humans, not robots.” She quoted fellow dentist-physician Jill Rigert, DMD, MD: “We need systems that are made for humans, not robots. Nothing in a career is more important than your life.”

In the healthcare industry, clinicians must first take care of their physical and mental well-being before assisting others. Metaphorically speaking, in the event of an emergency, flight attendants advise passengers to place their own oxygen masks on before helping others. If physicians don’t first prioritize their own needs, they are unable to provide others with care.

Seeking medical care or receiving news of a medical diagnosis is often an emotional and vulnerable experience. Humanistic practices encourage doctors to recognize this aspect of an individual’s healthcare journey and consider it throughout the treatment process.

Through a series of essays submitted by students at Geisinger Commonwealth School of Medicine in Scranton, Dr. Simoyan captured

the emotional response of aspiring healthcare workers to the current national crisis in healthcare. She quoted one medical student's essay in the literary journal *Black Diamonds*, of which Dr. Simoyan was the Founding Editor/Editor in Chief: "A disease is more than a diagnosis, it's an event. It is often a realization of one's own vulnerability. Remembering this can help us understand and connect a truly empathize with our patients."

Healthcare equity

Healthcare equity for all individuals is a focus within humanistic healthcare. Minority and socio-economically challenged populations often face significant barriers to accessing high-quality healthcare. Even when accessible, there are disparities in the quality of care delivered, resulting in suboptimal health outcomes. Equity within healthcare requires prioritized attention to the distribution of resources and opportunities that considers individual circumstances and needs. However, many challenges stand in the way of health equity in the nation, including continuing challenges post-pandemic, uneven regional distribution of medical providers, pre-existing social determinants of diseases, distrust of the health system, and lack of access to affordable care options such as Medicaid.

"We have unfortunately learned from a major report several years ago from the prestigious National Academy of Medicine that African Americans and Hispanics do receive a lower quality of health care across a range of diseases such as cancer, cardiovascular diseases, HIV, AIDS, diabetes, and mental health. Unfortunately, these inequities express themselves in premature, unnecessary,

and preventable misery and suffering," said Dr. Tuckson.

As noted above, health outcomes are often the consequence of social determinants such as housing, access to healthy foods, transportation, violence, and technology access.

As such, many causes of health disparities, according to Dr. Tuckson, can be found "at the cross-section of the social forces of our society. We've learned how important housing, food access, the ability to find healthy fruits and vegetables, fairness in care delivery, and access to technology-enabled care, are for optimal health outcomes."

Additionally, trust in the healthcare system is paramount to bridging the care access gap. Health insults such as the Tuskegee Syphilis Study, an unethical medical research study on Black men with syphilis conducted from 1932 to 1972, continue to contribute to an extensive distrust of the health and science community by many African Americans. The decades-long study denied participants the medication that would have treated their disease. There continues to be widespread mistrust in the healthcare system, and therefore Dr. Tuckson emphasized that compassion and trust must be reestablished through a shared community vision of health goals and a consistent respect for the dignity of each individual.

"What we're talking about is whether or not the healthcare system is responding to its ethical responsibility to respectfully address all the people who share our time and space and whether they will live or prematurely die," said Dr. Tuckson.

How corporations can contribute to humanism

Healthcare leaders can contribute to facilitating humanistic care across

health systems. Healthcare industry leaders have a responsibility to nurture workplaces and medical offices as spaces that support humanism first and foremost.

"Human engagement is the cornerstone of effective healthcare but also extremely important to running a successful enterprise," said Neale.

When a patient visits a medical office, their experience is impacted by everyone they interact with. They form a relationship directly with the clinician who is treating them, but also with everyone whom they engage with. Patients are impacted in the same way by the person who draws their blood, the person who makes their appointment or processes their bill, and all staff within a medical facility. This presents an opportunity for the entire staff of a health organization to create meaningful, individualized connections with patients.

"At every single step, when that individual enters the healthcare ecosystem, there's an opportunity for a relationship that drives people to start and maintain positive health changes," said Neale.

Humanism in healthcare emphasizes a respectful and compassionate relationship not only between doctors and patients, but also throughout a healthcare team, including other clinicians, members of the healthcare team, and family members. Implementing humanistic practices in medicine strives to improve healthcare outcomes and ensure overall patient and clinician well-being.

According to Dr. Levin, "The human connection in healthcare leads to more meaning. That is why doctors and nurses got into this field in the first place. Humanism helps create better outcomes, better patient experience, and a better bottom line." **REP**