

# The meaning behind your white coat

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A short white coat may not seem like a life-changing article of attire, but for medical students donning them for the first time as they begin their physician training, it is exactly that.

Often seen as a symbol of authority and professionalism, the white coat frequently is conferred on new students during a ceremony held at the very beginning of medical school. With the pandemic changing how celebrations and rituals are conducted, medical schools are finding alternatives to their traditional induction ceremonies for new medical students.

Taking place Aug. 19 at 7 p.m. CT, the AMA's Virtual White Coat Ceremony will recognize and celebrate the nation's next generation of medical students. A one-of-a-kind event featuring some of the leading voices in medicine, the event will be broadcast on the AMA's YouTube channel.

## History of the white coat

The ceremony signifies the beginning of medical students' journeys to achieve the long white coat, when they are physicians. It also symbolizes professionalism, caring and trust, which they must earn from patients, according to an essay providing historical perspective on the doctor's white coat that was published in the *AMA Journal of Ethics*<sup>®</sup>.

"I do think it carries that real symbolism of being in the field. I'm working in the hospital right now and there's so much confusion," said Tonya Fancher, MD, MPH. She is the associate dean for workforce innovation and community engagement at the University of California, Davis, School of Medicine (UC Davis). "When someone in the hospital sees someone with a white coat it indicates that you are someone who knows what's going on, and that's just kind of the power of the symbol."

The short white coat works as a steppingstone to the longer white coat many students progress to at

the completion of their degree.

"Students beginning their studies in medical school see their education and role as future physicians as aspiring to be worthy of the long white coat," according to the *AMA Journal of Ethics* article. "Medical school must give students the scientific and clinical tools to become doctors. Just as importantly, the white coat symbolizes the other critical part of students' medical education, a standard of professionalism and caring and emblem of the trust they must earn from patients."

## Professionalism and humanism

White-coat ceremonies offer an induction into the noble calling of medicine. To Carol A. Terregino, MD, senior associate dean for education and academic affairs at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, that means a focus on two key principles for the provision of care: humanism and professionalism. "We tell our students you develop your professionalism through relationships, reflection and resilience," Dr. Terregino said. "It's something you wear all the time when you don't have the white coat on.

"For me, humanism is making sure that the patient in front of you knows that they are the most important thing on a physician's mind during that encounter and in their care. You can do that in a lot of different ways. There's power in making connections. You can use your eye to let patients know you are with them, you understand them and you care about them." For new medical students beginning their training during the COVID-19 pandemic, the AMA has curated a selection of resources to help manage the shifting timelines, cancellations and adjustments to testing, rotations and other events at this time.