Leadership in Health Care for the 21st Century

To the Editor:

Arroliga et al write that new health system leaders must be trained for the 21st century. These health leaders must be able to work in teams, be emotionally mature, and have empathy. They are absolutely correct. Our current outdated health care system evolved into its present state from the early 20th century, along with the social mores of that time. But the 21st century requires a paradigm shift in how we prepare future health care professionals and leaders.

The present model of medical education promotes individualism in a very hierarchical setting. Many medical students develop a sense of entitlement during their long, hard years of school. By the time they enter the clinical arena, their sense of superiority has been established; this mindset is reinforced by the social and cultural milieu of academic medical centers.

Social and cultural norms are hard to change, especially in places where the roles of physicians, nurses, and other health care professionals have been set in stone for over a century. The best way to promote teamwork and to instill a sense of understanding and empathy is to have all health care professionals begin with a common core of education and training. For example, future physicians would understand the roles and responsibilities of nurses firsthand because they would have worked as nurses.

This background would provide them with excellent clinical assessment and communication skills—areas in which nursing education excels. Nursing education also stresses aseptic technique and infection control, increasingly important subjects in an era of diminishing antibiotic effectiveness. Medical education does not emphasize these topics.

Students wishing to become physicians would stay on the educational ladder longer, while those not wanting to devote so many years to training and deferred income would be able to step off at prespecified times. Health professionals who decide in subsequent years to become physicians would be able to return to the educational ladder. This flexible system would break down hierarchical, professional barriers and promote clinical excellence, teamwork, empathy, and leadership.

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Reference