



## Reflections on the Department by a faculty member who started as a “department med student groupie” in 1980.

Edward M. Hundert

February 15, 2022



I start with gratitude – for Paul, for his predecessors who have led our Department, for my fellow departmental faculty past and present who inspire me every day, for our students and trainees who come here to change the world, for our dedicated, professional staff who make it all possible, and for the shared values that bind us together to strive toward the realization of the HMS vision for “alleviating human suffering and improving health and well-being for all” – with that final word, all, being most important.

The invitation to write one of these monthly 150th anniversary reflections on my journey within our Department has been a meaningful opportunity to take stock of how our Department has played such a central and positive role across my entire professional life. My four-decade (plus) career at HMS began after deferring admission for two years to study moral philosophy at Oxford between college and medical school. This timing landed me as a first-year HMS student in the summer of 1980, starting my journey simultaneously with Leon Eisenberg’s arrival as chair of the brand new “Department of Social Medicine and Health Policy.” I was DSMHP’s first “med student groupie,” hanging out at 641 Huntington Ave as much as “Building E” (as TMEC was then known). Leon took me under his wing, as he did with so many others.

A defining moment occurred halfway through my first year: I was having lunch with Leon in what was then the grand cafeteria dining room in Vanderbilt Hall. I mentioned that I sometimes questioned my decision to enter medical school, having turned down the chance to be a philosophy tutor at Hertford College, Oxford, where I’d won an award for the “highest first” in my year that traditionally led to an offer to stay on to teach as a tutor. I joked how I must have been crazy to choose this life of cramming details of the Krebs cycle instead of sipping sherry and port with my fellow dons at high table! Leon got that famous twinkle in his eye and said he had “an idea.” He explained that he recently learned that the faculty member who had been teaching the medical ethics elective sponsored by the Department, Dr. Stanley Reiser, had just accepted a faculty position in Texas; thus the Department was without a medical ethics elective offering for the next year. He said he wondered if perhaps he and I could “co-teach” it. Always one to work the system, he’d list himself as the course director for the purposes of the course catalogue but leave me to put the syllabus together and organize the class.

The registrar arranged my schedule to accommodate this plan, and I spent much of that summer organizing the syllabus, lectures, discussion questions, etc. The first class was not quite what I expected. Leon introduced me to the group (including many of my second-year HMS classmates who signed up for the novelty of taking a class from a peer) as a “new teacher brought here to HMS at great expense,” turned the class over to me, and left the room! Thus did my life teaching medical ethics at HMS begin. With incredible support from the HMS registrar and Leon, I was able to continue teaching the course every year thereafter. The early years of that elective included some memorable students, and to this day Jim Kim introduces me as the person who taught him medical ethics as a med student at HMS!

I could fill many pages gushing about my mentors and role models in our department, starting with Julius Richmond who always inspired us to reach for greater impact than we thought we were capable of at any moment. Rashi Fein was a particularly influential mentor, and I spent one pleasant summer as his research assistant going through every one of his published and unpublished papers, editing them into a “collected works” volume that a publisher wanted him to produce. After all that, Rashi then decided not to publish it, based primarily on his modesty about whether such a volume would add anything to the literature – but I learned a lot about health economics, anyway

Leon brought with him from MGH to the Department in 1980 his executive assistant, the amazing Carla Millhauser (later Carla Fujimoto) who also became a major supporter and friend. It was Carla who, sitting outside Leon’s office on evenings and weekends, “word-processed” (as we then called it) every page and reference of my first book with Oxford University Press: 350 published pages from thousands of hand-written manuscript pages and index cards in shoe boxes! Needless to say, both Leon and Carla feature heavily in the acknowledgments of that nearly impenetrable tome.

Fast forward through residency and those first years as a junior faculty member at HMS (all the while still teaching the medical ethics elective through the Department): In 1990, the two Dan’s (Tosteson and Federman) asked me to succeed none other than Carola Eisenberg as student affairs dean at HMS – and there are even more Eisenberg family connections that could be added. A year and a half into my deanship in student affairs, the staff director of student affairs moved to New Mexico, leaving me in search of a new administrative partner – just the year Leon retired as chair of our Department! A very memorable conversation over coffee with Carla was all it took, and soon she was Director of Student Affairs for HMS – a role she continued for almost three decades until she likewise retired. For the next six years until I left to become dean at the University of Rochester (where I had the opportunity to appoint Carola’s psychiatrist son Larry Guttmacher to a student affairs dean role!), Carla was the best administrative staff partner any faculty leader could ever ask for.

My last reflection on the “Leon years” is a memory from the symposium at which Leon inaugurated what he originally dubbed the “Division of Medical Ethics.” There were, of course, a number of distinguished speakers in the field; but the talk I remember best is Leon’s opening. He said that he was creating the Division of Medical Ethics (which has since evolved into the HMS Center for Bioethics) with multiple aspirations, and that first among these was that it should “be subversive!” He wanted to ensure there was a home for people not just to move forward the academic discipline of bioethics, but also to “hold a mirror up to HMS” and speak truth to our own school’s leadership about ways we may not be living up to the moral values we espouse. Leon was everyone’s favorite subversive in any faculty meeting (often “swearing like a sailor” to punctuate his points), and he wanted us to know that the structure we were creating that day should institutionalize this important role.

After nine years away in Rochester and then Case Western Reserve, I returned to the Department in 2006 at the invitation of Dan Brock, who invited me to direct, once again, the HMS medical ethics course which was finally moving from an elective to a required part of the first-year curriculum. Over the 16 years that have followed, I’ve been in constant awe of how our Department has gone from strength to strength. When I was named Dean for Medical Education in 2014, Paul liked to talk about how the Department is “infiltrating the Dean’s Office,” and now with Anne Becker as Dean for Academic and Clinical Affairs, the infiltration could not be more secure! We are truly fortunate to have in George Daley a dean who is so supportive of our Department’s mission, and people should remember that George started a philosophy major at Harvard College before he got swept into bioscience – he brings a breadth and depth of perspective that is rare and wonderful! One of George’s aspirations for his deanship is to work with Paul to endow the Department to ensure it thrives into the future, or, to use a Harvard expression, “without limit of time.”

Now in my eighth year as Dean for Medical Education, it’s been a joy to see how our educational offerings in the HMS curriculum have grown – not just in medical ethics, but equally in social medicine. I believe HMS leads the nation in “curricular real estate” in these areas! I’ll never forget when we were working on the Pathways curriculum reform: we were trying to come up with a name for the two months of full time, required pre-clerkship and post-clerkship courses that would integrate social medicine and medical ethics with health policy and clinical epidemiology/public health perspectives. Since Pathways’ new opening “basic science” course (combining things like cell biology, genetics, immunology and anatomy) was to be called “Foundations of Medicine,” we dubbed our course “Essentials of the Profession” and that has really stuck – HMS students all refer to their course on social medicine and ethics as “Essentials!”

To close this reflection with one aspiration for our future, we should all reflect back on Leon’s broad vision for the Department. Leon’s vision spanned not just medical anthropology and sociology, history of medicine, bioethics, etc., but also the philosophy of medicine (epistemological issues), the arts and humanities, and the intersection of literature and medicine. When Robert Coles retired, Leon supported Martha Montello to fill the void for a literature and medicine course through the Department, and he mentored students who wanted to explore how human health could be improved through dance or music.

Since Leon’s time, we have brought so much more global health to our mission – leading to the change in our Department’s name – which I celebrate! My last plane ride before the pandemic was a trip to Rwanda with Paul, returning the last day of February 2020 after a transformative two weeks that served for me as a “booster shot” for the importance of the global health work we do through DGHSM. We are, inevitably, the defenders of the rigor of the social sciences – a rigor which indeed needs defending in a quad filled with the nation’s leading geneticists, neurobiologists, and immunologists. But we have at times over the last few decades not swept in the arts and humanities as much as Leon envisioned for us, perhaps for fear of being branded as “the department for ‘soft’ stuff.” In more recent years, we have begun to rectify this, with David Jones providing a home for the HMS Arts and Humanities Initiative through the Ackerman endowment, which is wonderful. I hope we can do even more of this without fear of being branded a less scholarly department, both because there are scholarly approaches to incorporating the arts and humanities, and also because, as scholars, we should take heed of Aristotle’s famous dictum that “It is the mark of the trained mind never to expect more precision in the treatment of any subject than the nature of that subject permits” (Nic Ethics, Thomson trans.). There is no other HMS department to support HMS students and faculty with these broad interests, so they can only thrive if our department provides them strong support.

I continue to learn every day from my fellow faculty members in DGHSM. You give me inspiration to carry on working to make the world a better place. Words cannot express my gratitude for the last four decades plus – and still going strong!