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Biomedical Graduate Students Begin Their Careers With an Oath

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—By Jen Uscher, special to the *Reporter*

This August, the new class of graduate students at Pennsylvania State University College of Medicine will gather for a rite of passage that is not typically associated with future researchers. Before an audience of family members, faculty, and peers, they will pledge to uphold the values of integrity, professionalism, and scholarship in their careers as biomedical scientists and will be cloaked in their first white laboratory coat.

“For many years, I had seen white coat ceremonies for physicians and said, ‘Why not create one for graduate students?’” said Michael F. Verderame, Ph.D., associate dean for graduate studies and a professor of medicine at Penn State and chair-elect of the AAMC’s Graduate Research, Education, and Training (GREAT) Group steering committee. “I wanted our incoming students to have the sense that what they’re doing is important and it matters—that graduate school isn’t just about getting through the next exam.”

Traditionally, first-year medical students—and many optometry, dentistry, and pharmacy students—begin their studies with a white coat ceremony that includes the Hippocratic oath or another professional oath. A small but growing number of biomedical graduate programs are extending this tradition to students pursuing master’s or doctoral degrees, creating their own oaths that speak to research ethics, professionalism, and institutional missions.

At Morehouse School of Medicine, a Biomedical Scientist’s Pledge is part of both fall convocation and graduation. Students pledge to use their “energy, intellect, and education to enhance the lives of all mankind, understanding that often the greatest strides are made through efforts to assist the dispossessed and underprivileged in our world.”

“That was an important nod to the special mission of Morehouse School of Medicine,” said Douglas F. Paulsen, Ph.D., associate dean for graduate studies and professor of pathology and anatomy at Morehouse.

At Penn State, Verderame launched an inaugural Graduate Student Oath Ceremony in 2009. He presented the idea to the medical school’s Graduate Student Association (GSA), and a student committee spent almost a year on preparations, developing an oath, printing it on laminated cards for students to sign and keep, and selecting a keynote speaker.

Rachel Fogle, Ph.D., a postdoctoral fellow at the Center for Vascular Biology at the University of Connecticut Health Center, was president of the GSA at that time. She was on the committee that crafted the oath and led the students in reciting it at the first oath ceremony in 2009. “We wanted to set the bar high for maintaining ethical standards,” she said. “As students, we’re pulling together and holding ourselves, the larger scientific community, and incoming students accountable.”

Many students keep the lab coat they receive at the ceremony throughout their graduate training and after graduation, Fogle said.

Chris Jenney, a fourth-year Ph.D. candidate in neuroscience, said he keeps the card with the oath in his planner as a reminder of a meaningful transition in his life. “Taking the oath was a good way for us to start our careers as scientists,” he said.

Verderame was inspired to create the oath ceremony in 2008 after reading an article in the journal *Science* that described an oath for first-year graduate students at the University of Toronto’s Institute of Medical Science (IMS) and proposed such oaths be standard in graduate science education.

“It helps us begin a dialogue with our students about professionalism and ethical conduct,” said Karen D. Davis, Ph.D., who co-authored the *Science* article and is a professor in the department of surgery and associate

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Students at Penn State recite the oath during the 2011 graduate student oath ceremony. From right: Zainul Hasanali, M.D./Ph.D. student; Sadie Hogan, biomedical sciences Ph.D. student; Andrew Huhn, neuroscience Ph.D. student; and Anuj Kalsy, microbiology and immunology Ph.D. student



Elliot S. Vesell, M.D., Evan Pugh professor emeritus of pharmacology and founding chair of the Penn State College of Medicine department of pharmacology, helps Jennifer Booth, D.V.M., who is pursuing a master's degree in laboratory animal medicine, into her lab coat at the 2011 Penn State graduate student oath ceremony.

director at IMS. “Then we supplement and reinforce these concepts throughout the year with other workshops and lectures on research integrity and ethics.”

Davis was a little worried that students might not take the oath seriously when they read it for the first time at an orientation session in 2007. “But the feedback we got was extremely positive. Students said the oath was thought provoking and made them feel part of the scientific community.”

Over the past few years, Davis has talked with faculty from at least six graduate schools that are developing oaths of their own, inspired in part by the *Science* article. “The interest is really picking up, and the concept is more widely discussed.”

There is not an exact count of the number of biomedical schools that have oath ceremonies, but Verderame conducted an informal survey of GREAT Group members in 2009 and said that 12 schools reported having some type of oath ceremony.

At most schools, first-year students recite an oath soon after they arrive on campus, but some incorporate it at graduation or other times. West Virginia University School of Medicine, for example, has a Research Induction Ceremony that marks the completion of core course work and transition to a research lab. Students are cloaked in a lab coat by their faculty mentor and recite an affirmation. During graduation, they recite the affirmation again.

Although each school's oath is unique, all serve to foster a sense of camaraderie among students. In the future, they can always return to take the pledge again, welcome a new class, and reconnect with their colleagues.

“We come from different places, ethnicities, cultures, and undergraduate majors,” Fogle said. “Our oath helps us remember that no matter where we came from, we’re all in this together.”