



## Mini review

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# The Pediatric Physician as Exemplary Human Being: John Kirkpatrick

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Too much of the medical curriculum, whether at the level of medical school, residency, or continuing medical education, emphasizes the mind. Medical articles, books, lectures, and online education resources focus on conveying knowledge and skills, as though one could produce a good physician merely by filling up heads with appropriate facts. In fact, however, good pediatric physicians are not only knowledgeable and skilled. They are also persons of high character, good human beings, and serve as a reminder of the need to educate the heart as well as the head.

**Introduction**

Medical educators know well how to fill heads: create a curriculum chockfull of facts, marshal the latest educational technologies in transmitting this information, and then test learners to make sure that they got it. But when it comes to educating the heart, matters are not so simple, for what needs to be conveyed is not merely propositional. It is difficult to write on a white board or digital index cards what makes a person morally admirable. To convey this kind of knowledge, we need to focus less on facts and more on people, and specifically the best role models we have available.

The author of perhaps the single greatest work in the history of philosophical ethics, Aristotle, argued that character must be educated not by textbooks and lectures but rather by emulation [1]. We need to expose learners to the very best exemplars we can, with the hope that as they associate with such individuals, they will gain a clearer sense of how truly good people – in this case, good pediatric physicians – regard such matters as the nature of their

work, its purpose, the kind of differences it can make in the lives of others, and its greatest sources of fulfillment.

In the search for truly exemplary pediatric physicians, one of the best places to start is John A. Kirkpatrick, Jr., MD. When I was first learning pediatric radiology, one of my teachers, a former Kirkpatrick trainee, often referred to him as an inspiration, and always in reverential terms. Kirkpatrick was not only a storehouse of knowledge and skill but also an admirable person who sought out and helped to bring out the best in others. While no words can adequately substitute for direct acquaintance with the man, they can at least draw attention to some of the essential features of his excellence as a radiologist and human being.

Born in 1926 along the Appalachian Mountains of Pennsylvania, Kirkpatrick graduated from high school in 1943 and enrolled in the Navy's college training program, intended to help boost the ranks of commissioned officers, at Franklin and Marshall College [2]. He continued his education at the Temple University School of

Medicine, graduating in 1949. He married his wife, Jane, in 1950, the same year the Korean War started, and he entered active duty at the Naval College in Annapolis. After two years of service, he undertook a radiology residency at Temple, completing his studies in 1955.

Kirkpatrick received permission to complete the last months of his residency with Edward Neuhauser, chief at Boston Children's Hospital, after which he became the first radiologist at St. Christopher's Hospital for Children in Philadelphia. Having established himself as one of the most capable and admired figures in pediatric radiology, in 1974 he accepted an invitation to succeed Neuhauser in Boston, from which he retired in 1992. By that point, he had trained generations of pediatric radiologists, served as president of numerous societies, and garnered the gold medals of many professional organizations. He died in 1994.

One reason Kirkpatrick functioned so effectively as a role model was his clinical excellence. Described by a colleague as a "brilliant observer with an encyclopedic knowledge of diseases of children," it is said that members of the house staff would sometimes order chest radiographs on patients "just so we would have an excuse to discuss the patient with Dr. Kirkpatrick" [3]. His reputation for clinical excellence brought many health professionals into his orbit, who then enjoyed opportunities to appreciate and absorb aspects of his character.

But his great disciplinary expertise was matched, perhaps even outmatched, by his practical wisdom, as reflected in the high regard in which others held his personal judgment. Said one colleague: I always knew that when a problem came up, I could go to him, and his advice was the right thing. I am of course not speaking about what test to do, or the differential diagnosis, though his judgments in those matters was always impeccable; I and many others here at Children's always knew that Dr. K., our mentor, was the fixed point in the moral compass, and when we were lost, he would point us in the right direction. There is nothing more important and reassuring for physicians in training than to have a model of how to do your job the right way [3].

As these words of appreciation indicate, Kirkpatrick possessed two crucial kinds of judgment. First, how to achieve a particular result. He could tell others what steps would need to be taken in pursuit of their goal. Yet even more importantly, he had a clear sense of what was most essential for a person to be doing, and by questioning and listening and understanding a situation in depth, he could provide guidance on the worthiest aims to pursue. He wasn't merely clever – he was also good, and this goodness infused his judgment.

Kirkpatrick cared about people, as indicated by his capacity to recall names after only a single meeting. One of his contemporaries who introduced him at a national meeting is quoted as saying, "I am proud to be numbered among John's several hundred close personal friends" [4]. He treated everyone, regardless their station in life, courteously. He regarded others not with suspicion or cynicism, but with respect and affection, and this attitude helped him form relationships with countless people. He proved to be

utterly trustworthy. With Kirkpatrick, people came first.

Kirkpatrick also cared about the pursuit of knowledge. He cared less about admitting his own ignorance on some topic than gaining a better understanding of it, and when someone had advanced his knowledge, he was quick to acknowledge and thank them. Instead of repeating the same old canned presentations again and again, he continuously updated them to incorporate new information. His thirst for knowledge was infectious, and colleagues attested to the fact that when he was present, everyone tended to learn and teach more.

Kirkpatrick also cared about work and sought to inspire others with a similar love. He tended to arrive at work earlier than others each day. If someone asked for his help, his natural impulse was to agree. He regarded such requests not as interruptions but as opportunities to be of service and make a difference for a patient or colleague. Anyone who collaborated with him knew that he was doing more than his share of the work, not because he had to but because he wanted to. He wore his dedication lightly, inspiring not resentment but emulation in others.

When he retired as chief of radiology at Boston Children's Hospital, having served as a leader of pediatric radiology departments for 37 years, colleague Thorne Griscom recalls his remarks as follows:

He said that he felt he had been fortunate in his opportunities and friendships; that he hoped that none of us would forget that the promotion of our patients' health is our primary mission; that we should constantly keep in our mind our responsibility to teach enthusiastically and to treat our students at all levels and of all affiliations with fairness and dignity; that a willingness to listen solves many problems; that respect for others, no matter how ordinary their status, is crucial, as is recognition of their contributions; that if one can engender friendship and mutual respect among one's colleagues, most interpersonal friction disappears; that a responsible leader must be willing to make difficult, wounding decisions from time to time; and that no one is indispensable [4].

Even John Kirkpatrick was not indispensable – pediatric medicine carries on without him. Yet he was surely one of the noblest, most gracious, and most humane pediatric physicians of recent times, and it is vital for the field that we keep such examples before us, calling forth from each of us our better selves. We can never become better pediatric physicians than we are human beings, and Kirkpatrick shows us as well as anyone the full potential of such human excellence. As important as any textbook, journal, or professional meeting, his memory is one of our most precious resources.

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## Conflicts of Interests

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