

How Language Shapes Medical Realities and Ethical Decisions

Friday, April 10, 2026

8:00 am – 3:45 pm | Breakfast @ 7:30

Passavant Hospital Foundation Conference Center

[700 Cumberland Woods Drive, Allison Park, PA 15101](#) with free parking

IRA R. MESSER LECTURE

The Words We Use—

How the healthcare system impacts how we see.

And how what we say impacts what we see.

Michael DeVita, MD

Professor of Clinical Internal Medicine

Columbia University Vagelos School of Physicians and Surgeons

Director of Palliative Care, Harlem Hospital Center in New York

CONFERENCE ABSTRACT AND OBJECTIVES

This conference will explore how the words used to describe an issue influences discussion and decision-making about the issue. Terminology used in discussing diagnoses, prognosis, and death; how responsibilities of decision-making regarding a loved-one's care are presented to family members and surrogates; the many meanings of hope; how language can escalate or de-escalate conflict; how descriptors used in medical records can follow patients for the rest of their lives—these topics will focus examination of how language frames ethical issues and medical decisions. Following the conference, participants should be able to:

1. Employ strategies to reduce conflict both among clinicians and between clinicians and patients and family members;
2. Avoid use of stigmatizing language when describing patients and interactions with patients and family members that can impair delivery of appropriate care;
3. Appreciate and respond effectively to patients' and families' expressions of hope;
4. Employ narratives to convey complex medico-scientific information involving balancing or risks and potential benefits, probabilities, and weighing of personal and community benefit;
5. Communicate effectively about prognosis and quality of life considerations to avoid confusion and increase trust as patients near the end of their lives.

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CONFERENCE SCHEDULE	
7:30 – 8:00 am	Registration and Continental Breakfast
8:00 – 8:15 am	<p>Welcome</p> <p>Daniel R. Sullivan, MD, JD, MBA Chair, Passavant Hospital Foundation Board of Directors</p> <p>Introduction: Why Words Matter</p> <p>Valerie Satkoske, PhD Vice President for Ethics for UPMC Health Services Division Co-Leader for UPMC Spiritual Care and Chaplaincy</p>
8:15 – 9:15 am	<p><i>Red Squares, Flags, and Documenting Expletives: The Ethics of Workplace Violence Responses</i></p> <p>Laura Guidry-Grimes, PhD Clinical Assistant Professor, Department of Bioethics, School of Medicine Clinical Assistant Professor, Department of Medicine, Cleveland Clinic Lerner College of Medicine of Case Western Reserve University</p> <p>Introduced by Ariel Clatty, PhD, Director of Medical Ethics, UPMC Presbyterian, Shadyside, and Western Psychiatric Hospitals</p> <p>Abstract: Workplace violence (WPV) is a significant and pervasive problem in healthcare. Interventions to address WPV are necessary, though how we flag or label patients and families can raise ethical questions about procedural fairness, avoiding stigma, and building the therapeutic relationship. This session will analyze the ethical dimensions of common WPV responses with sensitivity to different moral perspectives of the involved parties.</p> <p>Following this presentation, participants should be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe the problem of workplace violence and the necessity of WPV interventions; • Analyze the ethical dimensions of WPV responses, particularly those that flag/label patients and families; • Discuss cases and potential responses to WPV, given associated ethical challenges.
9:15 – 9:30 am	Break
9:30 – 10:30 am	<p><i>Fighting Words: Semantic Challenges in Healthcare Safety</i></p> <p>John “Jack” Rozel, MD, MSL Professor of Psychiatry and Law, University of Pittsburgh</p> <p>Introduced by Jessica McKelvey, MSW, Candidate in the University of Pittsburgh Master of Arts Program in Bioethics</p> <p>Abstract: Language is often ambiguous—especially when expressed in a moment crisis and interpreted by person unsure of their meaning. As the longstanding problem of violence in healthcare has come into the spotlight anew, the challenges of using effective communication skills to recognize and de-escalate conflict early is more important than ever. This presentation will explore some of the practical and ethical challenges in recognizing, de-escalating, and responding to agitation and threatening language in modern healthcare settings.</p> <p>Following this presentation, participants should be able to:</p>

- Distinguish between threats and leakage;
- Apply basic steps of verbal de-escalation;
- Explain the role of threat management programs in supporting clinical teams facing perceived threats.

10:30 – 11:30 am

The Thing With Feathers? How Moral Philosophy, Empirical Research, and the Arts Situate Hope in Pediatrics

Michael Certo, MD, MA

Assistant Professor of Pediatrics (Palliative Care), Northwestern University
Feinberg School of Medicine

Introduced by **Andrew Thurston, MD**, Clinical Associate Professor of Medicine, Medical Director of Palliative Care, UPMC Mercy, University of Pittsburgh

Abstract: Despite generally positive connotations in politics, religion, advertising, pop culture, art, and common conversation, the concept of hope within the clinical pediatric medicine is contentious. Clinicians caring for children with life-threatening illness and their families may perceive significant tension between the ethical principle of autonomy—the duty to not provide “false” hope and deceive the patient or family, and that of beneficence—the duty to sustain hope and thereby maintain patient well-being. The presentation synthesizes themes in moral philosophy, music, poetry, and empirical research, concluding that hope is best conceptualized as a coping mechanism, and that doing so helps alleviate perceived ethical tension, refocuses hope on the emotional experience of the patient and family, and provides insight into their response to adversity.

Following this presentation, participants should be able to:

- Illustrate the perceived clinical tension between autonomy and beneficence that arises when hope is framed solely in terms of its veracity;
- Understand how the concept of hope has evolved through history, and how moral philosophy, empirical research, and art inform our modern understanding of hope;
- Explain how, within a pediatric clinic setting, reframing hope as a coping mechanism can relieve perceived ethical tension and provide valuable insight regarding response to adversity.

11:30 am – 12:30 pm

Lunch

12:30 - 1:30 pm

Narratives, Not Just Numbers: Language, Media, and Vaccines

Beth Hoffman, PhD

Assistant Professor of Behavioral and Community Health Sciences,
University of Pittsburgh

Introduced by **Lianne Vighetti, DHCE**, Medical Ethicist, UPMC Presbyterian, Shadyside, and Western Psychiatric Hospitals

Abstract: This presentation traces the historical roots of the anti-vaccine movement and shows how earlier narratives and strategies continue to shape contemporary anti-vaccine rhetoric. It then examines how social media can be leveraged for effective vaccine promotion, highlighting evidence-based communication strategies that build trust and counter misinformation. Finally, this presentation explores examples of entertainment-education approaches that use storytelling and popular media to promote awareness of vaccine-preventable diseases and the importance of vaccination.

Following this presentation, participants should be able to:

- Explain the history of the anti-vaccine movement as it relates to current anti-vaccine rhetoric;

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify ways in which social media can be used for vaccine promotion; • Discuss examples of entertainment education regarding vaccines. 	
1:30 – 1:45 pm	Break
1:45 – 2:45 pm	<p style="text-align: center;">The Ira R. Messer Lecture</p> <p><i>The Words We Use: How the healthcare system impacts <u>how</u> we see. And how <u>what</u> we say impacts <u>what</u> we see.</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Michael DeVita, MD Professor of Clinical Internal Medicine Columbia University Vagelos School of Physicians and Surgeons Director of Palliative Care, Harlem Hospital Center in New York</p> <p>Introduced by Lisa S. Parker, PhD, Dickie, McCamey & Chilcote Professor of Bioethics, University of Pittsburgh</p>
<p>Abstract: The healthcare system is designed to be efficient and effective. Part of that design appropriately requires triaging patients into silos of care, and requires analyzing organ system function and potential causes. Speech reflects this focus. In this presentation, the impact of this design will be deconstructed and some of its impacts described. A way of normalizing and personalizing using language will be presented and promoted. Once seen, it cannot be unseen.</p> <p>Following this presentation, participants should be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe how viewing the person as a physiological entity is essential for effective healthcare; • Relate how the perspective may have the effect of depersonalizing the patient; • Identify methods to promote “seeing” the person, and how the language used can be an important tool to overcome perceptual boundaries. 	
2:45 – 3:45 pm	<i>How Language Shapes Medical Realities and Ethical Decisions</i> Panel Discussion with Drs. Certo, DeVita, and Hoffman
<p>Abstract: Panelists will address participants’ questions and engage with each other to examine points of synergy across all conference presentations and apply key takeaway points to novel contexts. They will discuss features of clinical and medico-scientific communication that increase/decrease trust and comprehension. They will examine and contrast methods of explanation, persuasion, and manipulation.</p> <p>Following this presentation, participants should be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Draw analogies across different clinical scenarios to explain how word choice, body language, and other aspects of communication shape patient and family understanding of the diagnosis, prognosis, and treatment options; • Choose effective communication strategies—e.g., use of narrative, active listening, and multiple frames—to encourage questions, increase understanding, and warrant patients’ and family members’ increased trust. 	
3:45 pm	Conference Adjournment

COURSE DIRECTORS

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