

Virtual Mentor

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VIEWPOINT

David Hilfiker, MD

Audiey Kao, MD, PhD

Whether it is called charity care in medicine or pro bono work in the law, providing service to the poor is an important aspect of professional behavior. Taking care of the poor has become one of the cardinal virtues in medicine. Its lineage dates to the Medieval era, when both Christianity and Islam shaped medicine's commitment to the poor. Despite the rise of the modern welfare state that seemingly has replaced many traditional forms of charity medical care, the need for medical professionals to devote themselves to the poor has never been greater.

One physician who has taken this obligation very seriously is . Formerly the Medical Director of Joseph's House in Washington, DC, Dr. Hilfiker is currently Finance Director for Joseph's House. Although no longer in active medical practice, he is a family practitioner who spent 7 years practicing in rural Minnesota and 10 years in the inner city of Washington, DC. He began working at Community of Hope in 1983 in Washington, DC, and then helped found Christ House in 1985. He and his family lived for 5 years at Christ House, a 34-bed medical recovery shelter for homeless men, and for 3 years at Joseph's House, which he founded. The experience changed him in a profound way: "When you put yourself in a relationship with the poor, you begin to see the world in a very, very different way," he stated. He is also highly critical of our current health care system, which privileges the middle class and demonizes and marginalizes the poor. Although an active writer, he is now vocationally "in transition," trying to learn as much as he can from speaking with the men at Joseph's House.

In addition to his work with the poor, he is the author of *Healing the Wounds* (Pantheon, 1985) and *Not All of Us Are Saints* (Hill & Wang, 1994) as well as numerous articles, most dealing with the medical care of the poor. He has recently completed a short book on inner-city poverty. He has also written about the importance of recognizing and learning from medical mistakes.

For his work in helping homeless patients with AIDS, we are proud to present this month's Virtual Mentor award to Dr. David Hilfiker.

Audiey Kao, MD, PhD is editor in chief of *Virtual Mentor*.

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