

THE KENNETH B. SCHWARTZ CENTER

Dedicated to strengthening the relationship between patients and caregivers

Amy Ship, MD

Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center

The Schwartz Center is proud to name Amy Ship, MD, the winner of the 11th annual Schwartz Center Compassionate Caregiver award.

Only connect! That was the whole of her sermon. Only connect the prose and the passion and both will be exalted, and human love will be seen at its height. Live in fragments no longer."
E.M. Forster, Howards End

Amy Ship, MD, sees the poetry in everyone, says a colleague.

It is a pitch-perfect way to describe an internist who views art and literature as salve for the soul and is constantly awed by the courage and complexity of her fellow human beings. "What I am most struck by is her emotional and intellectual connectedness," says the colleague. "She reminds us to be human to each other."

Ask Amy – an English major with a master's degree in art history - about her caregiving philosophy and she will quote a favorite line from novelist E.M. Forester – a command both simple and profound: "Only connect!" It's something her admirers say comes as naturally to her as breathing, whether the patient is the CEO of her hospital, an 89-year-old retired reverend or a Chinese grandmother who speaks no English.

Even patients who arrive at her office reluctantly, like an elderly woman whose long-time physician could no longer manage her complex medical needs, are disarmed by her kindness and ability to engage. "On that initial visit, I was amazed to see that Dr. Ship and my Mom just clicked," says the woman's daughter. "There was this connection, this palpable affinity that I witnessed, and it was remarkable to see and feel. Mom would always say that Dr. Ship 'made a fuss over her.' And I know she loved feeling pampered and receiving the TLC."

In Amy's world, there is no such thing as patients, only people. "These are mothers, brothers, sisters, and fathers," she says, explaining her resistance to viewing them simply as vessels for illness or health. "The minutes or hours I spend with them are just a tiny piece of their much, much bigger experience." And she solicits the details of that experience in every encounter though her unrushed manner, her warmth, her gentle questioning and her curiosity about "where they've been and where they're going," as she puts it.

"Dr Ship often asked mom about what her life was like growing up in Ireland and of her life while living in England during World War II," says the same patient's daughter. "[Dr. Ship] would joke about wanting to go back in time with her and spend a day in her childhood with her."

Amy is famous for her fierce loyalty to her patients and their families, as generous with her time as she is with her heart. She regularly visits a beloved former patient at a nursing home. Email her on her day off and you are likely to get a quick answer. Families whose loved ones are no longer her patients still turn to her for medical advice.

“I recall not so long ago waking up in my hospital room and seeing her sitting in a chair,” says a patient. “In all of my years of not such good experiences, having the doctor wait for me to come around and being there for me not only showed me how wonderful and caring she is but also how concerned she is for me as a person and not just a patient.”

Amy’s own painful experiences with the health care system – as the mother of two young boys with profound disabilities – are a constant reminder of the importance of even the smallest kindness, and how empowering it is for patients and families when caregivers begin from a place of hope.

“I believe in the power of finding what’s good, then focusing on the positive,” says Amy. “Instead of focusing on limitation, I focus on capacity. And I celebrate small accomplishments.”

Amy’s personal journey with her sons – her eldest, Ari, died in 2006, also tuned her ear and heart to what she calls the “secret sadness” in so many people. “Ari’s death changed how I perceived patients,” says Amy. “I ask people how they are and I really mean it and I listen. I’m more attentive to what’s going on in their family. I’m more receptive to the possibility of something that may not be visible but informs their life.”

Amy is cherished not only by her colleagues and patients, but also by the dozens of medical students and residents she has mentored over the years. For her students, she is a compelling example of the challenge, the intellectual rigor and the importance of internal medicine – “the liberal arts of medicine”, as she calls it.

“Dr. Ship makes it clear through her example that general internal medicine is a vibrant, satisfying career in which doctors can be life-long learners and guiding forces in the lives of their patients,” says a former student.