



## **A Call for a More Compassionate Healthcare System**

*“In my new role as patient, I have learned that medicine is not merely about performing tests or surgeries, or administering drugs. These functions, as important as they are, are just the beginning. For as skilled and knowledgeable as my caregivers are, what matters most is that they have empathized with me in a way that gives me hope and makes me feel like a human being, not just an illness.” – Kenneth B. Schwartz (1954-1995)*

If there is one issue that unites patients and their healthcare providers, it is the yearning for a deeper human connection. Compassion is recognizing the concerns, distress and suffering of others and taking action to address them. As such, compassion is essential to high quality healthcare and should be at the heart of our healthcare system.

Compassionate care is not separate from other kinds of care, nor is it reserved for the end of life; it is fundamental to all patient-caregiver relationships and interactions. Without it, care may be technically excellent but depersonalized and cannot address the unique cultures, concerns, distress and suffering of patients and their families.

In today’s healthcare system, we believe compassionate care is at significant risk. Despite improvements in quality and safety and a focus on patient-centered care, caregivers face numerous challenges that impede their ability to form meaningful relationships with patients and families, including fragmentation and uncoordinated care, burgeoning clerical and administrative responsibilities, increased cost and market pressures, inadequate reinforcement of communication and listening skills, and technologies that both help and hinder communication and relationship-building.

To foster a more compassionate healthcare system, we are calling on all who believe in the importance of compassion and compassionate healthcare to support and endorse the following set of commitments, which we believe would go a long way toward making compassion a priority in our healthcare system.

- 1. Commitment to Compassionate Healthcare Leadership**

Healthcare leaders who embrace and model compassion foster a culture of compassion within their institutions and organizations. They play a crucial role in communicating the value and benefits of compassionate care and marshaling the resources necessary to make compassionate care possible.

- 2. Commitment to Teach Compassion**

Healthcare leaders, educators and caregivers who model, teach and reinforce the core values and skills of compassionate care foster them in students and trainees.

These skills include attentive listening, empathic concern, mindful self-awareness, effective communication, and the ability to elicit, understand and appropriately respond to the concerns, distress and suffering of patients and their families.

**3. Commitment to Value and Reward Compassion**

Healthcare institutions that value, support and reward the cognitive, emotional and collaborative work and time required for caregivers to provide compassionate care allow such care to thrive. These institutions are committed to the development of valid and reliable measures and methods to assess and reward compassionate care.

**4. Commitment to Support Caregivers**

Healthcare institutions that demonstrate compassion for caregivers equal to the compassion shown to patients and families help preserve caregivers' resilience and sense of purpose. Excessive workloads, lack of control, lack of rewards, loss of a sense of community with colleagues and co-workers, perceived unfairness and lack of respect, and conflict between organizational and individual values contribute to burnout and erode engagement with one's work.

**5. Commitment to Involve, Educate and Learn from Patients and Families**

The needs and perspectives of patients and their families should be an organizing principle around which compassionate care is delivered. Patients and families should be involved in designing and evaluating care delivery and organizational policies at all levels. Healthcare, consumer and advocacy organizations can play a key role in educating patients and family members about the elements and importance of compassionate care, their right to ask for it when it is absent, and to take action when its absence impacts their health or wellbeing.

**6. Commitment to Build Compassion into Healthcare Delivery**

Those who design care processes should consider how changes in care delivery and associated tasks affect caregivers' capacity, ability and time to interact directly with patients and families. The continuity of patient-caregiver relationships should also be a priority within and across healthcare settings as well as in the community to lessen patients' sense of being alone and unknown when they are most vulnerable.

**7. Commitment to Deepen Our Understanding of Compassion**

An integrated research agenda should be developed and funded to study the neuroscientific, psychological and clinical aspects of compassionate care, its outcomes, and what compassionate care means to diverse patient populations.

Please support our Call to Action and its seven guiding commitments by visiting [www.committocompassion.org](http://www.committocompassion.org) and pledging to do all that you can to ensure that our healthcare system is a humane and compassionate one for patients, families and caregivers. The well-being of each and every one of us depends on it.