Five questions for Brandon Combs[1]

As a clinician-educator, Brandon Combs takes a thoughtful approach to the health care system, patient outcomes and the training of future physicians.

Doctors often feel it necessary to do something to help a patient, he said, but sometimes those well-intended tests or treatments don't actually help – and can also do harm. That idea was something he often thought about during his residency at the University of Colorado. After joining the university as a faculty member, he co-founded the Do No Harm Project to highlight such instances, which are referred to as medical overuse.

In truth, he thought about how physicians could improve health care practices even before then.

"In college, I felt if I became a physician, I would be doing something that would be compellingly useful and that made me feel good," he said. "As I think about this more as the years have gone by, the fact that my mother became ill when I was in high school was more influential than I probably gave it credit for. That experience strongly influenced why I went into medicine and became an internist.

"The things she dealt with and the things that I observed, especially instances where I felt communication could have been better. There was a lot of anxiety and fear and those could have been allayed, but they weren't."

Combs felt that as a physician, he could do better. After finishing medical school at Saint Louis University, he came to CU in 2007 for his residency. He joined the faculty in 2010. Combs is an associate professor of medicine, specializing in internal medicine. He's affiliated with the University of Colorado and the Veterans Affairs Medical Center.

In 2012, Combs and a colleague – Tanner Caverly, who is now at the University of Michigan – co-founded the University of Colorado's Do No Harm Project to highlight instances of medical overuse as an educational tool for physicians in training.

In addition, he's a senior fellow for medical education with the Lown Institute and an editor for the Teachable Moments section at JAMA Internal Medicine. He also has served as a visiting professor for the past three years at the University of Zimbabwe.

1. What was the impetus of the Do No Harm Project and how has it evolved since you co-founded it in 2012?

There's a common perception that exists among clinicians that the provision of common health care interventions -- like blood tests or scans or medications -- generally will lead to improvements in the health of patients. We see evidence of this all around us, for example, with health fairs, antibiotics for minor respiratory infections or the use of MRI for simple low back pain. Because we often feel positively about these interventions, physicians can have a hard time recognizing when more health care – even things that are the standard of care -- may actually be worse for the patient. This is not malpractice, rather care that seems quite reasonable but is probably avoidable, so-called medical overuse.

As a means to raise awareness concerning patients that were harmed or nearly so by health care that seemed perfectly reasonable, Tanner and I decided to start the Do No Harm Project. Basically, we asked trainees – medical students and residents – to write up clinical cases of medical overuse and review the scientific evidence as well as the patient's unique perspective and then reflect on how we can do better going forward.

One of the things that was inspired by the Do No Harm Project is a journal section in JAMA Internal Medicine called Teachable Moments that launched in 2014. This section publishes clinical vignettes of medical overuse from trainees. Since 2014, we've published nearly 100 of these vignettes, and both Tanner and I are editors for this series.

2. Why is the program popular and a great educational tool?

I think it relates to storytelling. There is something about being human that we really connect with stories. The stories

are also a scaffold for the science and a good way to help trainees learn the details of clinical medicine.

3. Are there statistics to showing how often a physician introduces a treatment that is unlikely to improve health?

There are some pretty jarring statistics that were reported by the Institute of Medicine a few years ago that say about one-third of every dollar we spend on health care is waste – about $750 billion annually. Waste is all of the things you might imagine: prices that don't make sense; duplication of tests and studies because health records don't communicate with each other; and missed opportunities. What I find really interesting is that a portion of that waste – about one-quarter – is considered medical overuse. As I mentioned, it's not necessarily bad care, but seemingly reasonable care that nevertheless is unneeded on the basis of scientific evidence or patient preference. Yes, it is expensive, but the reason it matters is because it is harmful and avoidable.

4. How often does a patient influence those decisions? Perhaps that patient has read something or seen a television advertisement touting a treatment or medicine.

Of course, patients will influence treatment decisions, but more than that, they influence our conversation. I want to know their perspective and what they are worried about, where they heard something, what they'd like to do about it. And that way I learn where they are coming from.

I worry that patients are sometimes blamed for being demanding or that ordering behavior is driven by fear of malpractice, but that is not the whole story. First, these things are hard to see in real time. It can be a product of our own cognitive biases, the fear of being wrong or fear of hurting the patient if we don't do something. Humans don't like uncertainty; we don't like operating in shades of gray, we want to know for sure.

5. What would you consider to be one of the most important lessons you have learned during your time at CU?

I don't know if there's one thing in particular, but there has been something about the gravity, the seriousness of the work as a resident and now faculty physician that is incredibly meaningful for me. I like to think that I am doing something useful and making a difference. The experience I've had here has been tremendously gratifying.

CU sets record $924 million in sponsored research funding[2]

University of Colorado faculty researchers earned $924 million in research awards for the 2015-16 fiscal year, a record year for the four-campus system.

The preliminary total (final figures will be available later in the fall), comprising more than 2,000 research awards, is a 5.2 percent increase over last's year's total of $878.3 million. It also eclipses the previous record of $884.1 million in fiscal year 2009-10, a total fueled by one-time federal stimulus dollars.

"Record research funding reflects the high quality of our faculty researchers, whose work improves lives, advances knowledge and enhances the educational experience," said CU President Bruce D. Benson. "Their impressive abilities in securing research funding in a highly competitive environment also has a substantial economic impact on Colorado."

Some $606 million systemwide came from federal agencies and $317.9 million from non-federal awards. Research funding is earmarked by the funding entity for specific projects and cannot be diverted to the university's operating budget.

The campus totals are:

CU Boulder — $436.8 million CU Colorado Springs — $8 million CU Denver — $25 million CU Anschutz Medical Campus — $454.2 million

Review of CU Regent laws, policies continues[3]

A formal review of University of Colorado Regent laws and policies – 98 in total – is underway and the University of Colorado Staff Council (UCSC) will be able to offer feedback during the process.

Dan Montez, director of the Office of Policy and Efficiency (OPE), offered a brief overview of the review process to UCSC during its Sept. 15 meeting on the Anschutz Medical Campus.

Montez said the review has several goals: evaluate and simplify policies where necessary, better align the Regent policies with Administrative Policy Statements (APSs) and campus policies, remove outdated or irrelevant policies and update policy language.

Montez said one policy under review, for instance, hasn't been changed since 1944.

The goal is to finish the process in two years. Patrick O'Rourke, vice president, university counsel and secretary of the board, will lead the review in coordination with Leonard Dinegar, senior vice president and chief of staff. Also involved will be representatives from system and campus administrations and shared governance groups.

A new website is in development and will allow interested parties to keep track of the process. The website will include a list of laws and policies under review along with any draft revisions and other notes about the document.

Also at the meeting, members received an update from UCSC member Gaylynne von der Nuell, who is serving on a committee charged with potentially equalizing the university's tuition benefit across all campuses. The committee is headed by Susan Szpyrka, senior vice chancellor administration and finance at the University of Colorado Colorado Springs, and includes the chief financial officers from each campus as well as faculty and governance group members.

The committee is hammering out a proposal that likely will be ready for review in the spring. Although the group is in the early stages of discussion, von der Nuell said the committee's leading plan is to develop a three-year pilot program that would provide an annual dependent benefit of $2,400 or a similar amount. The benefit would be the same for each campus. During the pilot program, data would be collected to determine whether the benefit was successful as well as financially feasible.

The current tuition benefit for dependents -- and also employees -- differs from campus to campus, in part because each campus must finance the benefit. Those differences, and when and if the benefit can be used at other than the employee's or dependent's home campus, have been a topic of discussion for several years.

UCSC currently is finalizing a survey on work and benefits – which includes questions on the current tuition benefit – intended to gauge how staff members currently use – or don't use – benefits and why. That survey is expected to be sent out in October and the results will be shared with campus administration.

In addition to conducting the survey, council's agenda items for the upcoming year include developing a proposal for paid parental leave for staff members and revising the Service Excellence Awards requirements.

New feature helps CU Health Plan participants kick bad habits[4]
[5]

Old habits die hard. A new component of CU Health Plan – Prevent, administered by Omada, wants to help

participants make the lifestyle change to say goodbye to unhealthy habits by providing guidance, help and support.

The new Omada component is a 16-week online program aimed at weight loss and preventing obesity-related chronic diseases. Participants are guided toward a happier, healthier well-being. The online program focuses on four main goals: changing food habits, increasing activity levels, preparing for challenges and reinforcing healthy choices.

Statistics show the need for lifestyle change is staggering. According to the Centers for Disease Control, nine out of 10 people with prediabetes do not know they have it. Without intervention, 15 percent to 30 percent of people with prediabetes will develop Type 2 diabetes within five years.

“We expanded our Prevent program to provide an additional option that is an interesting, engaging and personal online experience for plan participants,” said Erin Benoy, CU Health Plan’s director of health initiatives and affairs.

During the program, participants will have access to tools and features that make each stage as easy as possible. These include:
A personal health coach Weekly online lessons A wireless scale and pedometer to track progress Involvement in a small, private support group for added motivation Games to help participants understand how to apply newfound knowledge to real-life scenarios
At the end of the 16 weeks, participants will continue to receive feedback and support through Sustain, the long-term extension of the Prevent program with shorter weekly lessons, but the same supportive community.

The program is not about losing a drastic amount of weight at one time. Prevent is all about ensuring participants establish healthy habits that will last a lifetime. These habits will help participants remain successful, happy and healthier, so they can enjoy all aspects of their lives.

Interested in signing up? Visit omadahealth.com/cuhealthplan[6] and take the one-minute test to qualify for the program. The test will determine risk level for obesity-related diseases, such as prediabetes or heart disease.

President’s Employee of the Year Award nominations due Friday[7]

The President’s Employee of the Year Award will be presented to one system administration employee in recognition and appreciation of exceptional job performance. An award of $1,000 (subject to payroll taxes) will be presented to the chosen employee at a recognition reception hosted by System Staff Council on Nov. 16.

Nominations are being accepted through 11:59 p.m. Friday, Sept. 23. The award recipient will be announced the second week of October. If no qualified nominations are received by the deadline, no award will be given.

Considerations for nomination should include information on employee’s job performance specifically related to: customer service, teamwork, leadership and excellence. Please visit SSC President’s Employee of the Year Award[8] to view the nomination criteria and procedures.

Please note that significant improvements to the nomination process and requirements have been made, based on constituent feedback. Pay particular attention to the updated nomination procedures.

Roots of Change cares about young people’s hair[9]

Rocky Mountain Center for Total Worker Health established[10]

From lightning strikes to cosmic-scale events[11]

Chancellor reports on humanities course reaction; Regents support[12]

CU Boulder team developing bike for obese riders[13]

From the Police Chief: Bomb Squad deems suspicious device harmless; how you can be an effective bystander[14]

In memoriam: Deborah Jin[15]

Erwin named Chief Human Resources Officer at CU Boulder[16]

Behind the scenes: CU Boulder's Nobel laureates gather for campus photo[17]

Watson named UCCS Human Resources acting director[18]

School of Medicine faculty contribute to book of essays on medical miracles[19]

Lifetime in education leads to global gathering in Denver[20]

In the late 1940s, with World War II in the past and the world increasingly opening two-way avenues for college students and educators, Ruth Purkaple joined a new organization promoting those educational exchanges.

That nonprofit, NAFSA: Association of International Educators[21], attracted 10,000 members to Denver for its annual conference, May 29-June 3. Purkaple, a lifetime member, was among them.

“It’s fun being here,” Purkaple said, “even if none of my contemporaries are.”

Purkaple is 105.

She retired from the University of Colorado Boulder in 1978. Her work there as director of Study Abroad was the culmination of a higher-education career that had taken the Denver native to posts at institutions across the country. Some of the exchange programs she established at CU-Boulder – such as one with England’s Lancaster University[22] that dates back 45 years – still are thriving today.

“It’s what I breathed and lived,” Purkaple said of international education.

At the Colorado Convention Center, Purkaple briefly took in some of the sights and sounds of the conference’s International Education Expo Hall, where educators from more than 100 countries were on hand to reaffirm existing ties between institutions and foster new ones. Her nieces Nancy Hart and Barbara Sihombing escorted her, as did CU-Boulder’s Larry Bell, a modern counterpart of Purkaple’s, serving as executive director of international education and Global CU.

Bell recalled the last time NAFSA came to Denver, in 1999, when attendance was roughly half of this year’s event. “It continues to grow,” he said.

Purkaple, obviously, goes back further.

“I remember when we had about 200 members and thought that was terrific,” she said.

Like NAFSA, CU can proudly point to impressive growth in the ranks of international students at its campuses, which collectively counted enrollment of about 4,400 students from outside the U.S. in fall 2015.

“It’s changed dramatically in the size and scope of it,” Bell said. “At CU-Boulder, we have more than doubled the number of international students in five years, going from 1,200 in 2010 to 2,600 in 2015.” The number of Study Abroad participants has risen, too, up 30 percent.

CU-Boulder leads the state in international enrollment. CU Denver (1,463 students) and UCCS (282 students) also rank in Colorado’s top 10, at fourth and sixth respectively. The CU Anschutz Medical Campus adds another 70 international students to the CU system tally.

Purkaple’s visit included stops at the expo booths hosted by the University of Denver – her alma mater – and her former workplace, CU-Boulder. At that substantial display marked by multiple banners, all four campuses had sent representatives to engage with the world by meeting face-to-face with potential partners.

“Time marches on wonderfully,” Purkaple said. “It’s just great.”

CU’s presence at the NAFSA 2016 Conference and Expo reached far beyond its impressive station in the exhibition hall. All four campuses hosted tours for conference visitors. A series of Global Learning Colloquia included sessions at CU Denver[23], exploring topics such as STEM, business education and education for health professionals. A special session hosted by CU Denver [24]explored “Inclusion and Impact: Collaboration Between U.S. Diversity and International Offices.”

During the i-Engage Talks, a rapid-fire series of eight-minute presentations a la TEDx, Erick Mueller, a senior instructor at CU-Boulder’s Leeds School of Business, donned his motorcycle vest before presenting to an audience in the expo hall. His monologue on his Tour de Happiness shared lessons from the time he rode a Harley-Davidson cross country to gather interviews for a study of what makes people happy.

Educators from across CU also presented at sessions held throughout the weeklong event at the Colorado Convention Center. One of them brought together CU-Boulder's Karen Crouch, program coordinator of international student orientation, and CU Denver's Saira Yasmin Hamidi, program coordinator in the Office of International Affairs, who demonstrated ways of using participatory theater to connect with international students during orientation. The session was chaired by Rebecca Brown Adelman, founding partner of Nederland's Affinity Arts Consulting; she co-founded and co-directed the Interactive Theatre Project at CU-Boulder from 1999 to 2015.

Links
[1] https://connections.cu.edu/spotlights/five-questions-brandon-combs[2] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/cu-sets-record-924-million-sponsored-research-funding[3] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/review-cu-regent-laws-policies-continues[4] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/new-feature-helps-cu-health-plan-participants-kick-bad-habits[5] https://connections.cu.edu/sites/default/files/app_cu-health_top.jpg[6] https://go.omadahealth.com/deployments/cuhealthplan[7] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/president-s-employee-year-award-nominations-due-friday[8] https://www.cu.edu/ssc/presidents-employee-year-award[9] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/roots-change-cares-about-young-people-s-hair[10] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/rocky-mountain-center-total-worker-health-established[11] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/lightning-strikes-cosmic-scale-events[12] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/chancellor-reports-humanities-course-reaction-regents-support[13] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/cu-boulder-team-developing-bike-obese-riders[14] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/police-chief-bomb-squad-deems-suspicious-device-harmless-how-you-can-be-effective-bystander[15] https://connections.cu.edu/people/memoriam-deborah-jin[16] https://connections.cu.edu/people/erwin-named-chief-human-resources-officer-cu-boulder[17] https://connections.cu.edu/people/behind-scenes-cu-boulders-nobel-laureates-gather-campus-photo[18] https://connections.cu.edu/people/watson-named-uccs-human-resources-acting-director[19] https://connections.cu.edu/people/school-medicine-faculty-contribute-book-essays-medical-miracles[20] https://connections.cu.edu/stories/lifetime-education-leads-global-gathering-denver[21] http://www.nafsa.org/[22] https://studyabroad.colorado.edu/index.cfm?FuseAction=programs.ViewProgram&Program_ID=491[23] http://cudenvertoday.org/nafsa-world-comes-denver/[24] http://www.internationalnewsroom.com/diversity-inclusion-nafsa-2016/