VMBARS MEDICINE FIELD GUIDE

The Hidden Curriculum of Medicine

Practical norms for learning, communicating, and contributing when the rules are rarely stated aloud.

WHAT THIS IS
The hidden curriculum is the set of expectations conveyed through behavior, incentives, hierarchy, and routine—not only through formal teaching. Learn to see it without surrendering your judgment to it.

1. Make the implicit explicit

Situation	Useful default	What to clarify
A new task	Restate the goal, output, deadline, and audience.	What does ‘done’ look like?
Unclear ownership	Name what you can own and what requires supervision.	Who decides, who executes, who must be informed?
A changing plan	Share a concise update before surprise becomes failure.	What changed, what is the impact, what do you recommend?
Feedback	Listen, test your understanding, and close the loop.	What should I repeat, stop, or change next time?
A safety concern	Escalate through the appropriate channel promptly.	What is urgent, who is at risk, and who has authority to act?

2. Communicate in a way that reduces uncertainty

The compact update

1. Situation: what is happening now?
2. Meaning: why does it matter?
3. Action: what have you done or what do you recommend?
4. Need: what decision, input, or resource is required—and by when?

This structure works for logistics, research, team projects, and many clinical-learning situations. It is not a substitute for the communication format required by your setting.

Professionalism is often operational

- Arrive prepared enough that others do not have to reconstruct the assignment for you.
- Make your questions specific and appropriately timed.
- Keep commitments—or renegotiate them early.
- Protect confidentiality in hallways, messages, devices, notes, and social media.
- Credit others accurately. Do not turn proximity into ownership.
- Notice the work of coordinators, assistants, nurses, technicians, administrators, and peers.

3. Read power and culture carefully

Signal	Possible interpretation	Do not assume
Silence in a meeting	Uncertainty, hierarchy, disagreement, or time pressure	That everyone agrees
A norm that saves time	It may support flow—or hide burden and risk	That efficiency equals quality
A highly available mentor	Generosity, role expectations, or current capacity	Permanent access
A blunt correction	Urgency, teaching style, stress, or disrespect	One incident explains the whole person
Who gets stretch work	Trust, sponsorship, similarity, access, or chance	Opportunity is distributed neutrally

ETHICAL BOUNDARY
Adaptation is not obedience. If a norm conflicts with safety, dignity, consent, law, or professional standards, seek appropriate guidance and use established reporting or escalation channels.

4. Build trust through a contribution loop

1. Observe what the team actually needs.
2. Clarify the smallest useful contribution within your role.
3. Deliver reliably and make the work easy to review.
4. Ask for targeted feedback.
5. Apply it visibly and acknowledge the people who helped.

A weekly reflection

Prompt	Your notes
What expectation became clearer this week?	
Where did I create or reduce uncertainty?	
Whose work did I fail to see?	
What feedback will I apply next?	
What norm deserves examination, not imitation?	
What relationship needs a thoughtful follow-up?	

Further reading: Gorick Ng, The Unspoken Rules, for a broader workplace framework on preparation, communication, feedback, and follow-through. *Scope: Educational only; not medical, legal, financial, or admissions advice. No outcome is promised.*