2026 DINNER and AWARDS for ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

William F. Parker, MD, Ph.D. (FASPE Medical 2010)
Award Presenter

Good evening, I am honored to be here tonight to present the 2026 FASPE Award for Ethical Leadership to Dr. Vardit Ravitsky.

In 2010, I was a medical student in FASPE's very first class of medical Fellows. One of the first lessons the program delivers is that German professionals who were complicit in or perpetrated atrocities thought of themselves as moral agents. Doctors who sentenced their disabled patients to death in the T4 program believed they were healing the German body politic, even as they abandoned their most basic ethical obligations for a warped ideology. FASPE uses history and the power of place to challenge some of the brightest early-career professionals to imagine themselves in the role of the perpetrator. The FASPE process embeds an ever-present moral alertness, a nagging doubt that pushes Fellows to constantly question their decision-making and remember their professional ethical obligations.

I'm now an ICU doctor, taking care of the sickest, most critically ill patients in the hospital. I'm also a researcher, a data scientist who designs systems to allocate scarce healthcare resources, so I feel the impact of my FASPE fellowship nearly every day in my work. I'd like to share two specific examples from the COVID pandemic.

As the virus first hit our shores and began to grow exponentially, pushing hospitals here in New York to the brink, I was asked to lead the team at the University of Chicago drafting our ventilator triage plan. We were given the terrible task of deciding which patients would get treated if we ran out, and we initially planned to adopt the New York protocol, which had been created by a state commission before the pandemic. But something didn't seem quite right about the way the protocol handled chronic medical conditions. After applying it in simulations to our own patients, we realized the New York protocol inadvertently discriminated against patients who had chronic kidney disease and would have disproportionately excluded them from ventilator access. Because of our work and that of others across the country, this unfair and poorly constructed system was never used to allocate ventilators.

Later in the pandemic, we finally had hope as the results from the mRNA vaccine trials were released. But the initial supply of doses would be extremely limited, and the CDC instructed states to prioritize healthcare workers. Something struck me as off about this plan. Even though I had worked in the ICU for weeks during each COVID wave, I was always well protected by an

N95 mask and at low personal risk of COVID. I realized too late that policymakers had committed a terrible bioethical blunder, and their plan would lead to thousands of avoidable deaths. My personal complicity in this bioethical failure was never more real than the day I received my second COVID vaccine dose in early January 2021, weeks or even months before the most vulnerable patients in my community got their first dose. I spoke out with op Eds and research papers, but it was too little, too late.

Modern biomedicine is full of "wicked" problems like these, problems that have hard tradeoffs between competing values and lack clear-cut right answers, and rapidly advancing technology keeps adding new ones. What makes a genetic condition "serious," and who gets to decide? How should healthcare systems and doctors incorporate AI? That's why we are so fortunate to have brilliant thinkers like Dr. Ravitsky leading the field of bioethics. She was recently elected to the National Academy of Medicine for her groundbreaking work on cutting-edge bioethical challenges in gene editing, reproductive health, and AI in healthcare.

Vardit Ravitsky has built a career on asking the hard question out loud, before the technology is deployed and before the policy becomes the default. She embodies the "FASPE pause", arguing that new technology should widen people's choices, not make the choice for them.

Dr. Ravitsky has built a career, and now leads an entire institution, around asking the hard question out loud before the protocol is written, the technology is deployed, or the policy becomes the default. As the power of technology in biomedicine grows, she will make sure conscience keeps pace. That is the kind of ethical leadership is exactly what our field needs right now.

Vardit, on behalf of FASPE, it is my privilege to present you with the 2026 FASPE Award for Ethical Leadership.