

Editorial

Mentoring and coaching in medicine

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The concept of mentor was first described by Homer in the *Odyssey*, personified in the character Mentor, the “wise and trusted counselor.” Physicians can be excellent mentors because of their motivation to serve, to share knowledge and experience, and their commitment to caring. Mentoring as defined by the Study Committee on Postgraduate Medical and Dental Education is “a process whereby an experienced, highly regarded, empathetic mentor guides another individual in the development and re-examination of their own ideas, learning and personal and professional development. The mentor achieves this by listening or talking in confidence to the mentee.”

Mentors have wisdom and experience worth seeking out. They are people who are willing to spend their time to guarantee a protégé’s success. Mentors are especially helpful when they share personal knowledge, advice, and experience, provide feedback about performance, and help mentees understand professional culture, traditions, networks and opportunities.

My career attests to the need for good mentors. There were no physicians in my family, but I was fortunate to find mentors who used their professional networks to introduce me to medical school faculty and to distinguished and successful professionals in the community.

During medical school, many of my teachers taught me well and served as exceptional role models. The best were smart, tough, fair, demanding, and supportive. They were also kind, humane, compassionate physicians caring for the poor, and always treating the sick and suffering with respect and dignity.

During residency, the faculty and more senior residents expected far more work and set a higher expectation for me than before. But they set the same high standard for everyone. My mentor during my endocrine fellowship was not a warm and communicative person, but he demanded curiosity, pursuit of excellence, hard work, critical thinking, and excellent communication skills.

I have been fortunate to have had many excellent mentors during my academic career who helped me through many important experiences and gave me much wise advice, but it is the wise questions they asked me at critical points that I remember most.

When I was concluding my

negotiation for my first faculty position, my chairman of Medicine asked me, “If you could do anything, what would you do?” I had never been asked that before—I never even asked myself that question—but I quickly formulated my answer, a different one than what we had negotiated. His response was, “Why don’t you do that and I will help.”

I followed my passion, with his help and guidance, along a different professional path.

Later, one of my patients, the president of the university, asked me during his office visit with me, “What are you going to do next in your career and professional life?” I answered, “I have been wondering about that and I have no idea.”

His next question was: “What did you want to do before you were professionalized?” I reflected back and explained that I had been a history major and had thought I would be a history professor. Although I had no clear idea what it meant, I said I thought maybe I would become the president of a small college. He asked, “Why don’t you do that?” My response was, “Because I have been professionalized.” Then he said, “You are better prepared than you think, and if you want to pursue that path I will help.” He helped, and again I changed my professional trajectory.

I tell these stories to emphasize how important teaching, coaching, and mentoring can be in our personal and professional development, and to illustrate the importance of mentors, mentoring, and coaching.

Although we intuitively know the definitions of each of these important roles and functions, let’s look at them again:

- Teaching is “to cause one to know something, to know how, to guide the studies, to impart knowledge, to instruct by precept, example, or experience.”
- A coach is “a private tutor who instructs and/or trains players, athletes, musicians in the fundamentals, skills and intricacies to improve performance.”
- A mentor is “a trusted counselor guiding the professional development of an individual.”

There is much overlap in these functions, and it is important to recognize that good mentors are all of these things, and that they change their techniques and functions over time based on the needs of those they mentor.

We recently surveyed small numbers of AQA members about what they would most like to contribute to medicine. The great majority responded, “to mentor undergraduate students, medical students, and/or young, less experienced



physicians.” If that describes you, I encourage you to seek out mentors for your professional development, and to serve as mentors to others.

The process of professional development is complex. Professionals must first acquire knowledge and the skills of their profession through study and experiential learning. But true professional expertise comes through practice and constant feedback, often from a mentoring relationship with a senior colleague. The mentee learns and internalizes the profession’s attitudes and values, most often with a mentor. Mentoring is an iterative process analogous in many ways to preparing for and embarking on an expedition.

Each mentor/mentee relationship must be based on the common goal of advancing the educational, personal, and professional growth of the mentee. Although there is no single successful mentoring model, there are identified characteristics of good mentors and mentees. Five basic elements for successful mentoring relationships have been described as:

- The relationship focuses on achievement or acquisition of knowledge
- It consists of emotional and psychological support, direct assistance with career and professional development, and role modeling
 - Both mentor and mentee derive tangible benefits
 - The relationship involves direct interaction, and is personal in nature
 - It emphasizes the mentor’s greater experiences, influences, and achievements in the profession or organization.

Good mentors inspire others to be like them because of aspects of their character, ethics, and expertise, and their accessibility and approachability. They respect and are respected by their peers.

Some general principles for mentoring are set out in the tables following. Hopefully, they will help guide mentors and mentees in this complex and developmental professional relationship of mentoring.

When I reflect on the people who had the greatest influence on me, I think of my coaches. From my first competitive swimming coach at the YMCA, to my swimming and water polo coaches in high school, junior college, and at the university, coaches were the most influential people in my life and early development. Each one coached me for many hours each day and over long periods, effectively coaching the required skills, and teaching me how to train and persevere, set high goals and aspirations, and improve through practice and repetition. They taught me how to compete and to understand the value of competition. I experienced the joy of improving, succeeding, and winning. They were also mentors who helped me to develop good values, to reflect and change, and to work as a team member for a common goal. I also learned about quantitative data, that the final time or score was not negotiable.

Recently, Dr. Atul Gawande published an interesting article

Table 1: Tips for Good Mentoring	
Self-Assessment	Mentor
Commit to mentoring	Offer guidance and direction regarding professional goals and issues
Have a clear understanding of your motivation to mentor	Provide timely, clear, and comprehensive feedback to questions
Mentor based on a realistic assessment of your skills and leadership abilities	Set goals, objectives, and timetables
Recognize barriers to good mentoring that often relate to time and be realistic about your time commitment	Explore, teach, and illustrate
Ensure a noncompetitive relationship	Discuss professional and unprofessional behaviors
	Discuss the importance of self-regulation as a professional
Set the Principles	Teach how to set priorities and how to politely say no
Develop mutual respect	Emphasize the importance of teamwork for a professional
Develop good communications and problem solving strategies	Offer wise counsel and answer questions clearly
Emphasize ethics and professional values	Offer to serve as a confidante, if appropriate
Be direct and honest	Model continuous learning
Commit to confidentiality	Build a professional network
Listen carefully to understand	Promote reflection and learning
Clearly communicate your expectations	Anticipate misunderstandings
Be flexible and adaptable	Promote greater initiative, independence, and self-reliance
Be fair and just	Address fears, anxieties, low self-esteem, worries, and pressure
Be nonjudgmental in the relationship	Ask questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are you passionate about? • What gives you the most joy? • What are you good or best at doing?
Communicate hope and optimism	Explain the criteria for advancement in the organization
Advise, don’t dictate or be autocratic	Encourage development of skills and knowledge
Give constructive criticism	Encourage original thinking and appropriate risk taking
Celebrate success	Share stories
Be reliable	Stimulate periodic reflection about the path and encourage continuous learning
Nurture self-sufficiency	
Share yourself	
Use common sense	
Remember career development is an evolutionary process	

in the *New Yorker* magazine, “Personal Best: Top Athletes and Singers Have Coaches, Should You?” In the article, he points out that in our traditional educational and professional process there is a perception that after a defined amount of time a student no longer needs instruction. It is presumed that after a certain point you go the rest of the way on your own by practicing what you have learned.

Find joy in your mentee's improvement and successes	Acknowledge contributions of your mentee
Have a clear understanding of the expectations and goals of your mentee	Help your mentee develop humility
Encourage your mentee's ideas and work	Help your mentee develop self-esteem
Provide constructive and useful critique of your mentee's work	Be aware of biases and don't let assumptions interfere
Challenge your mentee to expand and improve his abilities	Encourage your mentee to take on leadership roles
Respect the uniqueness and contributions of your mentee	Observe your mentee at her professional work

In contrast, coaching holds that no matter how well prepared people are after their education and training, few can achieve and maintain their best performance on their own. Most people continue to practice what they are already good at, but need an outside perspective to learn how to continue to improve.

Good coaches or mentors can observe a performance and break it down into crucial individual components, then make suggestions about how to improve. A good coach makes you aware of where you are falling short. Then, with the coach's feedback and suggestions and your own self-effacement and personal practice, you can move forward.

There are currently no recognized coaches in medicine. The practice of medicine is largely unwitnessed by anyone. After a number of years of "practice," a doctor is considered an expert forever. But this is clearly not true. Gawande writes: "As I went along, I compared my results against national data, and I began beating the averages. My rates of complications moved steadily lower and lower. And then, a couple of years ago, they didn't. It started to seem that the only direction things could go from here was the wrong one." Recalling an afternoon spent with a tennis coach improving his serve, Gawande decided what he needed was a surgical coach. He enlisted a former mentor who observed him in practice and made many helpful suggestions for improvement in his operations. With that coaching, he was successful in improving performance, and hopefully patient outcomes.

Gawande concludes, "Coaching done well may be the most effective intervention designed for human performance." He writes, "In the past year, I've thought nothing of asking my hospital to spend some hundred thousand dollars to upgrade the surgical equipment I use, in the vague hope of giving me finer precision and reducing complications. . . But the three or four hours I've spent with [my coach] each month have almost certainly added more to my capabilities than any of this."

While many of us empirically know the value and importance of teaching, mentoring, and coaching in professional

Self-Assessment	Learn
Have a clear understanding of your motivation to be mentored	Actively listen and contribute to the conversations
Select a mentor based on your short-term goals and career interests	Do your homework
Have a clear understanding of your expectations of your mentor	Use other resources to look up useful information
Be proactive to find mentors	Demonstrate the ability to set agendas
Be realistic about time commitments	Ask what knowledge, skills, and expertise you need to develop further
Ensure a noncompetitive relationship	Discuss what you believe to be the strengths you already have
Determine your areas of need	Be aware when the relationship has run its course
Determine the help needed to reach your potential and goals	Say "thank you"
Decide what you hope to gain from mentoring	Celebrate accomplishments
	Give back to the profession by mentoring others
Set the Principles	
Communicate your expectations	Accept criticism
Be reliable	Continually reassess performance
Be honest	Be respectful
Follow through	Act on your own initiative

development and in medicine, the effects of mentoring are difficult to measure and the literature is limited. Among the perceived benefits of mentoring include greater satisfaction in the profession, help with and a widening of career choices, improved coping skills, increased social support, improved professional development, improved bedside and learning skills, better ability to monitor personal development, improved professional behavior, broader educational experience, and increased networking.

Our profession requires us to be continual students and learners and show continual improvement as physicians. All of us can use good teachers, mentors, and coaches.

Physicians have always been teachers. We often think about teaching medicine in the traditional sense of lectures, case presentations, ward rounds, surgery, and other learning experiences. I believe we should view mentoring as a professional obligation and seek opportunities to mentor others.

I hope you will read and reflect on mentors, mentoring, and coaching and pursue opportunities to give back to others what you have learned and experienced preparing for and practicing in medicine.

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