

# The children of physicians



The viewpoints of a small cohort of medical students upon entering the profession of their parents

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**A**s a third-year medical student and MD/PhD candidate with a neurologist mother and a pediatrician grandmother, I have always wondered how heavily my path into medicine was influenced by my family. There are few<sup>1-3</sup> published accounts explaining why the children of physicians decide to become physicians themselves. I interviewed five fellow medical students who are themselves children of physicians: Jennifer, the daughter of an allergist; Layla, the daughter of a plastic surgeon; Sam, the son of a psychiatrist; Santosh, the son of an internist; and David, the son of a neurosurgeon. All are in MD programs and intend to become clinicians, while I envision a career as a physician scientist. I analyzed their viewpoints and compared them to my own experience. Despite the uniqueness of each story, there were shared similarities in their opinions and experiences growing up as children of physicians, their reasons for entering medicine, and their experiences in medical school.

In Ukraine in the 1940s my grandmother attended medical school by day and prepared cadavers for her medical school's anatomy lab by night. She became a pediatrician and married my grandfather, a veterinarian. She was chief of the Department of Pediatrics in her hometown for more than thirty years. My mother became a neurologist and practiced in Ukraine for ten years before emigrating to the United States with our family. She is currently the director of a stroke unit at a university medical center.

When I was thirteen years old, my mother took me to see neurosurgery performed at the hospital in which she was completing her stroke neurology fellowship. I expected to see dignified grey-haired doctors somberly operating on a sick patient. I saw young, arrogant physicians making inappropriate jokes while removing a tumor from a woman's brain. The surgeons advised me stay out of medicine, stressing the long hours and inadequate pay. After this experience, I decided that medicine was not for me. I entered college as a computer science major, following in my father's footsteps.

Among the interviewees, first opinions of the medical profession differed greatly. Recalling her first impression of medicine, Jennifer states, "Well, I loved it ever since I was a little kid. I can't even remember wanting to do anything else in my life." Layla shares Jennifer's opinion, adding, "I liked the idea of being a doctor at a very young age. It just felt very important and very useful, like you really made a difference in your patients' lives." Santosh's early memories of the medical profession were more fiscally oriented. He recalls thinking that medicine would be a financially rewarding profession with ample job stability. In contrast, Sam recalls the effect the profession's

long working hours had on his father's ability to participate in his life. He states, "I thought you had to work a lot. My dad wouldn't be able to make it to all the sporting events."

I wanted to further explore the effects that the long hours had on the physicians' families. When I was a teenager, my mother was completing her residency and fellowship, and most of her time was spent at the hospital. Nevertheless, I never felt that she was unavailable, and I learned to treasure the time I spent with her. Jennifer recalls her own thoughts on her father's practice: "I want to say his work comes home but that's because he's a doctor twenty-four/seven. He was extremely committed." She adds, "It doesn't bother me because I knew that his patients probably really need his time." Sam frames his father's busy schedule differently, "I think he believes that being a doctor always came first for him, even in front of his family." Layla states, "The way it affected me was indirectly: the way I saw it affected my mom. My parents are divorced and [my dad's time commitments during residency] had a huge role in it with my dad being gone a lot." When asked about what her mother thinks about medicine as a career, Layla, answers, "[Even though] it did negatively affect her, she still was very supportive of me going down the same path."

Reactions to observing their physician-parents in the professional setting differed among the interviewees. Layla recounts her first experience of seeing her father at work, "At home my parents and I would speak Persian. When I would go to the office, I would see him speaking English and being very professional. It was a different side of him. I felt like he was very important; like I couldn't talk to him or bother him. I was always really in awe of what he did." David describes his father's neurosurgery from a different perspective: "When I saw the surgery, it was because no one could watch me and it was the only way my dad could make sure I wasn't getting into trouble. I don't remember my dad's surgeries too much, to tell you the truth. I mean it could have been anything else, it could have been carpentry."

My parents, like those of David, Layla, and Jennifer, did not try to influence my career decision. But Santosh's and Sam's parents gave their sons very different types of career advice. "There weren't many options there. It was either go to med school or go to engineering school," says Santosh. Commenting on his parent's belief that Santosh's success is judged by his entry to medical school, he says, "It's a terrible perception if you think about it. I will do differently with my kids." On the other hand, Sam says, "My parents tried to push me out of medicine. My mom tried telling me to go into business."

Deciding to go to into medicine must be a personal decision. While medicine seemed like an obvious choice for the son of a doctor, I did not want to choose my professional career for reasons such as "continuing a family tradition" or "following in my parent's footsteps." But when I found that I was not happy in my computer science studies at the end of

The author with his mother, Sophia Ratushny Sharfstein, MD, and grandmother, Bina Sharfstein, MD. Photo courtesy of the author.

my freshman year of college, I spoke to a guidance counselor about possible career choices. And when a career in medicine was suggested, I embraced it as the career I wanted.

Layla describes her own path to medicine. In her mid-teenage years, she started to question her early desire to go into the medical field. “I almost just wanted to not go into medicine,” she says, concerned about the profession’s busy lifestyle and the length of training required. Layla describes the point in her life, after returning from a semester abroad in France, when she decided to enter medicine: “I felt like I came to the conclusion on my own later in life. It was totally separate from my dad. When I was younger, I was exposed to medicine all the time. Since I was around it all the time, I think I was just naturally more inclined to do it. But when I broke away from that and went abroad, I felt like I went through all the other options and then I came back around and said, ‘Well actually this is what I want to do.’” Layla describes what I, too, came to believe: “I realized that you make your own life. It’s up to you [to decide] what you are going to end up doing.”

What do parents who are doctors think about their children’s desire to enter medicine? When I called my mother to tell her that I was switching my major to biology and that I hoped to enter medical school, I expected to hear unbridled excitement—what I got instead was a response emphasizing caution. She told me getting into medical school needed commitment as well as grades that I frankly did not have at the end of my freshman year. Unfazed, and even emboldened by my mother’s warning, I started my sophomore year as a premed student. Once I decided that I was going to become a physician, something changed in me; for the first time in my life I felt driven. I let my newfound drive and devotion propel me through the rest of my college days, earning straight A’s and, finally, entrance to medical school.

Among the interviewees, I was not the only one whose motives were questioned. Jennifer recalls, “[My father would] always question me like, ‘Oh, really, why? You want to make the big bucks, is that what it is?’; always challenging me to give him the right answer.” She further explains, “[My father made] sure that I have the right reasons to go into medicine; not just because he’s a doctor, that I should be one, too. He wants to make sure that I am doing it, not for the money, not for anything else, but for helping people, making an impact on people’s lives.” David describes his father’s reaction upon hearing that his son wanted to enter medicine: “I think when I told him he kind of laughed or smiled. He was happy but he wasn’t sure how well founded [my decision] was. He just wanted to make sure I knew that it was a hurdle and that it is a lot easier said than done.” Despite his parents’ initial discouragement of him entering the medical profession, Sam recounts, “I think that they were excited that I actually chose to go into medicine.” Sam also adds that his parents suggested that he choose a medical specialty that allows for a balance

between work and personal life.

The insights provided by physician parents are influential in helping the students choose a specialty. Jennifer describes her father’s advice: “When you’re thinking of a specialty, think of three things: think of interest, first and foremost; also think of economics, you have a [standard of living] to uphold so you want to make some money; and lifestyle. [Consider] almost all equally but interest should be [weighed] a little bit more: you’re doing it every day of your life.” While her father would like her to take over his practice, Layla says, “I am almost ruling out plastic surgery because I saw what it did to my family. I don’t think it will be just a profession; I think it will be your life and that’s not attractive to me. It’s too much of a sacrifice, I think.” Sam does not think that children of doctors have any extra insight in choosing a medical field than their colleagues: “You hear all the doctors in the hospitals or all the medical students talking [and discussing the merits of different specialties]. Everyone has a good sense of what each field entails. People try to find the one that best matches their personality.”

The rigors of medical school present challenges for many medical students, and the children of physicians have a valuable resource in their parents. Jennifer says, “My dad would always say, ‘You can’t just jump in a patient’s room and see a patient. You have to earn that right to see a patient. Your relationship with a patient is like a sacred relationship. They look up to you; they listen to everything you say, everything you do. In order to have that relationship, you have to earn that.’” David describes his feelings of building a closer relationship with his father when he decided to enter medicine, “He wanted to share more. At that point, it kind of felt like he wanted to be more influential in my life.”

These five unique children of physicians all agreed on one topic: the career advice they will one day give their own children. Santosh reflects, “I would not push medicine as opposed to other fields. I would let them choose on their own.” Nevertheless, when asked how he would feel if his children become doctors, Santosh replies, “Honestly, I would be proudest if they were doctors.” Layla adds, “I think it feels good if your kids follow in your footsteps; every parent would like that. But I definitely am going to try not to influence them too much.” Sam describes the thoughts he will share with his children, “When you look back, medicine would really be the most rewarding job I can think of.”

### References

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