

Reflections

To the physician-parents of medical students

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As I made my way through medical school, I often felt I was reliving my adolescence complete with familiar stresses and pressures. Like a teenager, medical students strive for independence and responsibility, often to no avail. We yearn to be trusted enough to do what we imagine ourselves capable of, or at least for the opportunity to prove capability or fail. As a teenager asks to take the wheel of the family's minivan, we want to steer our patients' care plans. And yet, like a teenager with a learner's permit, there is always the safety net of someone else in the front passenger seat watching over us, ready to take control when we become overwhelmed. We are never alone, which provides comforting safety as much as it stifles our craving for independence.

My father and I butted heads frequently during my teenage years. We share similarly stubborn personalities that frequently clash. In my second adolescence in medical school, I found myself frequently reflecting on my relationship with my father. However, I now think of my dad with the gratitude and appreciation I rarely had in my youth.

I have grown to appreciate that my father is an impressive physician. After receiving a full scholarship to Butler University, he went on to University of Chicago Pritzker School of Medicine, and then completed a pediatric residency at Yale-New Haven Children's Hospital, and a Robert Wood Johnson Clinical Scholars Program Fellowship

at Yale University. He has now worked for more than 30 years at Mayo Clinic, including a 10-year term as department chair. He is an established vaccine researcher and has been quoted in many national news stories relating to vaccine hesitancy and vaccine-preventable diseases, including COVID-19.

I say this not in an attempt to impress, but rather to impress upon you the weight of my father's successes and the legacy that was on my shoulders as I followed him when I went to medical school.

I will not pretend that having a physician for a parent was not an enormous privilege. I benefited significantly from his knowledge and advice, not to mention financial security. However, these benefits were complicated by the pressure from comparing my journey into medicine to my father's career. This pressure, while a privilege to have, was at times crushing.

Those who know my father, the friends and family whose opinions I value most, know all that he has accomplished. Accomplishments that stacked on top of each other from a decades-long career seem like a white coat the length of Princess Diana's wedding dress train. I put pressure on myself to prove to others that I was worthy of his legacy. I had nearly every advantage entering medical school as a white, wealthy, straight, cis-gendered woman, not to mention the support of a physician-parent, and I needed to prove that I was making good use of these advantages and would not squander them. I had to accomplish something special and monumental to help others and make a mark on the world.

I remember a conversation with my father's friend and coworker about my first year of medical school, during

which he commented that I seemed to “only work and need to get out more.” Later, when I remarked on a new Netflix show I was watching, he told me that he “never had time for television in medical school.” Students are trapped between an expectation to pursue their medical studies rigorously and relentlessly while also having hobbies and well-rounded personal lives to discuss in interviews and on applications.

While in medical school, I had no time for myself or my personal growth. There were days of Step 1 studying, well before the COVID-19 pandemic, that the only human I spoke to all day was the check-in clerk at the gym. I could not schedule with any certainty time in the future for myself. If my schedule did make room for an occasional parent’s birthday dinner or date night with my boyfriend, I had to keep in mind that such plans were always at risk and frequently altered. If a practical exam was added to the schedule with short notice, or if a rotation decided to completely redo the work schedule for an attendings’ vacation, I had no choice but to cancel on the people who knew me and were trying their best to love and support me.

It is understandably easy for a parent to forget what it is like to be a teenager. But, no physician should be excused for forgetting what it is like to be a medical student. Luckily, my father has not forgotten his experiences in medical school, and for this reason he was an incredibly important source of support for me.

My first two years of medical school proved to be the hardest years of my life, and I felt at many times distanced from why I pursued medicine and who I was before medical school. Prior to entering medical school, I prided myself on having an optimistic attitude, even when attending a college known to be “where fun goes to die.” However, during medical school, I became isolated from my peers, sitting in the front of an auditorium classroom just trying to force as much knowledge into my brain, leaving no room for bonding with my peers, or space for my own previously positive personality. Medical school was about survival. Surviving spending half a day in the anatomy lab dissecting hand muscles to be followed by hours poring over *Netter Atlas* pages of the next day’s dissection. Surviving final exams covering 19 weeks of 20-hours-per-week of lectures. Surviving the constant feeling of irrelevance and cluelessness standing in the corner of hospital workrooms. Survive I did, but the cost of that survival is a debt that I am still trying to pay off.

My father could have been disappointed in me for struggling. He could have done so many things ranging from small comments to lengthy lectures that would have added

to the pressures of following in his footsteps. Instead, he told me of a friend of his who was hospitalized following a suicide attempt while attending medical school. My dad spoke with bitter regret over the failings of medical education that pushed a fellow student of his to that point, and later expelled him for his poor mental health. This story served as a reminder that many people hit lifetime lows while trying to get those two precious letters after their name, but those same people may still someday have the incredible rewards of serving as a physician saving lives. In telling this story, my father gave me permission to struggle and complain while I worked toward my goal.

When I finally began clerkships, I was admittedly surprised and overjoyed to find that I loved them. My first, a general surgery rotation, was a rotation I dreaded as it was so far from what I was considering for my own future. It turned out to be the best eight weeks I had since starting medical school. However, rotations were hardly a trial-free time. Eventually—inevitably—frustration with my personal failings as well as the failings of the American health care system, the medical education system, and of the human body became overwhelming.

Again, my father resisted any urges to tell me to toughen up. He did not lecture me on how this was what I signed up for. Instead, he told me about his first day on a new rotation during his intern year. I have never seen my father cry outside of a sad movie, and, before hearing this story, I would have been hard-pressed to think of a time my father was visibly overwhelmed. But on his first day of this rotation, while taking on new patients during the morning rounds in the neonatal intensive care unit, he fainted. The sheer quantity and importance of the day’s tasks pushed him over an edge that I had not realized existed. He told me he recalls recovering on a couch in the nurse’s nutrition center with his resident encouraging him to get up and get back to work.

He wanted me to know that the feeling of being overwhelmed at times is normal and not shameful. It is human. He emphasized to me that he had moments of weakness and failure, and it was okay if I had them too.

There were other stories of his struggles on the way to becoming a physician, and they all served as a reminder of one thing never far from my mind, and another that I knew, but often forgot. First, that medical training is incredibly difficult, and second, that it is difficult for everyone, even those for whom you’d least expect it to be.

Both teenagers and young adults under 25 years of age suffer high suicide rates that are on the rise.¹ Medical students are three times more likely to die from suicide than

their non-medical-student peers.² Any rate of suicide is concerning, but these increasing rates in adolescents and young adults should drive us to action.

Before moving from middle to high school, I had lost a classmate to suicide. Ten years later, one of my medical school peers took his own life within weeks of taking Step 1, and two years later I lost another classmate to suicide halfway through our intern year.

Despite this evidence of incredible strain on their mental health, both teenagers and medical students are frequently told to stop complaining and be more grateful.

Medical students are told to stop complaining about how much work they have to do and be grateful they have the chance to do it. Indeed, the privilege of attending medical school is an enormous one. Although I am very grateful for the opportunity that I had to become a physician, no amount of gratitude can fully erase the stress of two pre-clinical years spending every hour of the day studying save those five or six hours of sleep that only came at the point of sheer exhaustion. Many peers, instructors, and friends told me to be grateful, but all I wanted was for them to recognize how hard it was.

My father knew how hard it was. He understood that even though I was working the hardest I had ever worked, at times it was not enough. He understood that I felt like all my peers were working even harder and excelling more than I was, no matter how hard I pushed myself. Most importantly, he understood that I could be torn between being incredibly grateful for the many privileges and opportunities I had been given, and still struggle with the stress and pressure created by those same opportunities.

To all the physician-parents of medical students, please share with your children not just the many successes and triumphs of your career, but also your struggles. And please avoid the temptation to minimize your child's-student's work-load with comparisons to your own. The long-winded stories of 36-hour calls and unsafe patient loads are helping no one. Instead, please tell your child about the moments you were frightened, the times when thought you wouldn't make it through, and the time you nearly passed out on rounds. Please offer comfort when your child stumbles up the mountain, even if the terrain seems much flatter to you. Whether or not they've told you, your medical-student child has moments of struggle, and would love to know that their hero did too.

References

1. Curtin SC. State Suicide Rates Among Adolescents and Young Adults Aged 10–24: United States, 2000–2018. *Natl Vital Stat Rep*. September 11, 2022; 69(11): 1-9.
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