

Chapter 25

My Mentors in Medicine

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ABSTRACT

The author describes his journey of learning in medicine from childhood through graduation from medical school. The author describes how each of his mentors played a specific role at crucial points in his development. His parents and a high school professor inspired him to pursue medicine as a career. Academic, clinical, and research mentors assisted in the author's preparation for medical school. Finally, medical school faculty and staff at Weill Cornell Medicine enriched his medical school experience, guided his choice of psychiatry as a specialty, and encouraged him to think about the structure of his future career. The author gratefully emphasizes the importance of all of his mentors' efforts and resolves to serve a similar mentorship role for the next generation of physicians.

INTRODUCTION

The path one takes on his or her journey towards becoming a physician can be as beautifully complex as is the field of medicine itself. One must first develop an interest in the field, then cultivate the necessary skills, perspective, and work ethic to prepare for medical school, and then, finally, make informed decisions regarding specialty selection and clinical focus. Mentors play key roles in guiding the individual along the way. This chapter demonstrates the importance of mentors in the life of one recent medical school graduate as told in his own words.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE CHAPTER

Last week, countless days and nights of hard work and studying culminated in my graduation from medical school. My commencement ceremony was a joyous occasion, the implications of which I have still not been able to fully wrap my mind around. I have completed a journey I set out on almost 30 years ago, and now stand on the precipice of yet another, longer journey, which will be completed only when my life's work as a physician has concluded. This moment is fitting to reflect on my path and to appreciate

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-1468-9.ch025

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the roles of all of the individuals who have served as mentors and guided me towards my destiny. These supporters have been family members, educators, clinicians, and researchers; they have been diverse in every imaginable way. However, each has played his or her own role in my story, and each has earned my deepest gratitude. I hope through this text to do them justice and to demonstrate for the reader how many different kinds of mentors are necessary in the development of a physician.

My fascination with medicine stretches back as far as I can remember. My mother is a physician, so I grew up around the hospital amazed by all the people in white coats who knew unimaginable things about the human body, science, and the world. Medicine permeated all aspects of my life from an early age: my favorite movies, television shows, and books as a child were all related in some way to medicine; my favorite classes in school were the science classes that taught me about how the body worked; my conversations with friends and family regularly revolved around some element of human physiology about which I had just learned and was curious.

My parents became my first mentors as they nurtured my budding curiosity and encouraged me to dream of one day becoming a doctor too. My mother taught me about the sacrifice and the fulfillment that those in the medical field experience. I remember her always coming to kiss my forehead good morning when I was a young child as she would leave the apartment at what was, at the time, an unthinkable early hour of the day. She would then come home in the evening tired but beaming and overflowing with stories, both joyous and sorrowful, from an eventful day at the hospital. “If I’m going to be tired, I’m going to be tired doing something worthwhile, helping those in need” I remember her saying. Through her example and encouragement, she pushed me to reach for my potential and to do so in the service of others. My father, a middle school teacher, drove this message home through countless hours spent helping me to improve my mind and to develop a strong set of service-oriented values. Every day he would supplement my schoolwork with a few extra assignments of his own – these ranged from extra math problems to reading passages and writing essays. The extra work never grew to be overwhelming and he always made it clear to me that I was loved and respected by him regardless of what I achieved. However, he frequently referenced duty and honor and instilled in me from the start a powerful motivation to be the best I could be and to cultivate and earn the gifts I have been given. True to form, he encouraged me to become involved in various service initiatives in and around my community, including many at our local church. He often said “the self is too small an object to interest a wise person for very long,” and in so doing reminded me that the intellect he was helping me develop was neither solely nor primarily for my benefit – it was rather ultimately a mechanism to make the world around me a better place. My parents instilled in me a drive to learn, a motivation to grow, and a commitment to service from a very young age; in so doing, these two exemplary mentors first set me on my path towards medicine.

In high school I found another mentor in my freshman biology teacher—a man who poured his passion for his field into his teaching. He and I developed a close relationship, and it was in his class one day, during a lecture on skeletal anatomy, that I first determined irrevocably that I would become a physician. I found myself fascinated by the way he explained the body as a machine – intricate and beautiful – which somehow gives rise to human consciousness and experience. His love for his subject was inspiring, and he was always there for me, before school, between classes, and after school, to discuss the subject matter and nurture my interest. His impact on me was so formative that I would, one day, invite him to my medical school graduation. In the context of such amazing mentorship both at home and at school, my love of medicine developed, and I slowly began to understand the true nobility underpinning this field. Here, the brightest scientific knowledge is applied to address the darkest human pain. Here, people endeavor daily to lift up humanity in a compelling pursuit of knowledge and a fulfilling

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