Thursday Memo – May 4, 2017

Heartfelt Advice - Emily Yan Yuan

On behalf of the class of 2018, I want to congratulate all of you on the completion of your preclinical coursework. I don’t need to explain to you just how long the road has been to where you’re sitting right now. But in many ways you’ve only just arrived at the beginning.

Early on in my third year, a preceptor told me: you may not realize it yet, but the habits and practices that you incorporate into your work from this point forward will lay the foundation on which you will build the rest of your career. Beginning next week, all of you will begin to set the tone for the doctor you are going to become. So, as you are sitting here, on the cusp of taking a mighty step in honing your professional identities, I would encourage you to spend some time reflecting on what that means to you. Many times, you will find your convictions being tested by the realities and complexities of medicine and of human beings. You will care for patients that you come to deeply admire. In some, you will see your father, your grandmother, or even yourself. Others, you will struggle to connect with despite your tried and true “tell me more.” Some of your patients will express their fears in the form of anger, and sometimes it will be directed at you. In those moments, your challenge will be to look deeper, to find and accept the person in the context of his or her life and circumstances. This is not easy, but when you are successful it will be more rewarding than any exam score or evaluation.

Over the next year you will see the brightest and darkest aspects of humanity on a regular basis and experience first-hand the resiliency of the human spirit. On a warm day in mid-September, you may find yourself, as I did, sitting around a patio table with strangers, holding the hand of an 89 year old woman that I had just met. If life were fair, we would have been in her retirement home. Instead we were at a hospice home, where her son—and my patient—was dying from multiple myeloma. Then, on a cold morning in March, you might help deliver a brand new life into the world. Your hand will be the first touch that this person ever experiences. You’ll watch as a father hugs and kisses his wife before turning to embrace you too.

You will find that people who have known you for less than 24 hours will trust you with secrets that they’ve never shared with anyone. You will see parts of them that they have never
seen themselves. You will be with them as they receive breath-taking and life-altering news. And you will be with them still as they reach their emotional limits and break down. These moments will affect you… and that’s ok. In fact, as I have learned, it’s important.

For a third year clerk, the days are long but the weeks and months fly by, and it can be difficult to stay grounded. Find solidarity with your classmates. Be kind to one another: together you will witness the beginning and end of lives. Think about that for a second. This is said so often, perhaps it loses some of its gravity. Together, you will witness both the beginning and the end of lives.

Help each other maintain perspective. As you get worn down by assignments and grades and the inevitable competition inherent in medical education, remember that you all have the same goal. Lean on each other. Stand up for one another. Be proud of who you are not only as individuals, but as members of the UMASS medical school class of 2019.

As one team, step forward into the most challenging and most rewarding year of your medical school career. I’m excited for you. The whole UMASS community is proud of you. Remember that the most important tool you carry now is not your ability to write H&P’s or even your medical knowledge. It is your humanity, your kindness, your compassion. This is not an empty platitude; you will find it to be true time and time again. The rest of the clinical team will admire and appreciate your ability to be truly present with your patients far more than they will be impressed that you can recall the components of virchow’s triad. More importantly, this is what your patients will remember, long after their hospitalizations have faded from your memory.

Congratulations class of 2019. I can’t wait to see you on the wards.