Thursday Memo – April 4, 2019

Another medical student reflection this week. Charlotte Walmsley, UMMS MS1, sent me a reflection she did about her first year of medical school. Funny how some of the themes she writes about are issues we all still wrestle with years later (except perhaps in subtle different ways.) This is what she wrote as "an abstract" for her piece:

*The enclosed essay is a reflection on my first year at UMass Medical School. I believe it encapsulates the feelings of many medical school first year students: fear of inadequacy combined with an endless motivation to do right by future patients. I demonstrated these feelings by using lines from the Oath of Maimonides (an oath that all UMass first years take at the beginning of their medical school career) as well as the image of “my patient” (who is really all of our patients) in an ambulance. This piece offers an honest and personal voice from a young UMass student, as well as getting to the heart of a key characteristic of medicine – coming to terms with failure while striving for the greater good.*

You can respond with comment to Charlotte at Charlotte.Walmsley@umassmed.edu or to the list-serve directly. Enjoy.

**A reflection on my first year of medical school**

On the night before my white coat ceremony in mid-September, I took a drive around Worcester to clear my head. The windows were down, and I could feel the breeze on my face as my car picked up speed along Route 9. Thoughts swept through my mind of the oath I would be taking at the ceremony the next afternoon: *Thy eternal providence has appointed me to watch over the life and death of my fellow human beings.* I didn’t know what an eternal providence was, and even if I did, had it really appointed me?

It was late - nearly 10pm - and I was only a minute or two away from home. The night smelled faintly of smoke as I rolled up to a red light and came to a stop behind an ambulance, probably on its way to the UMass ED. I peered through the small back window of the ambulance to see an elderly man in a stretcher looking back at me; a single illuminated face in the darkness. He appeared to be around 70 years old, calm and not in any visible pain. Maybe he could see me, maybe he couldn’t, but time seemed to stop as we sat facing each other on that warm September night. I felt a symbolic turning point (I’m not a particularly spiritual person, but this had *eternal*
providence written all over it). My journey resting on the road before me, *May I never see in the patient anything but a fellow creature in pain.*

Standing in a sea of classmates the next day, feeling undeserving and unprepared, I took the oath with his face on my mind.

Now that my first year of medical school is coming to a close, I routinely ask myself – would I be better prepared to take care of my friend in the ambulance now? I have taken apart a human body and put it back together again. I have memorized the arteries of the brain and held the sciatic nerve in my fingers as I traced it to its emergence from the spinal cord. I know how to do a physical exam and acquire a full history from a patient. I have been coached on how to talk to patients about smoking cessation and opioid use disorder and alcoholism, all while being watched and critiqued by teachers and classmates. Yet when my friend’s face pops into my mind, illuminated and framed by the ambulance window, the feelings of unpreparedness come flooding back.

I am a true pre-med. Constantly wishing to be steps ahead and never feeling satisfied with my progress as it stands in the moment. With this in mind, will there ever be a day when I feel prepared to care for this friend of mine? His presence looms large in my mind. A representation of my future patients and the trust they will ultimately bestow upon me. A manifestation of my worries.

Amidst my long nights in the library and battles to find more space in my brain for extraneous (but high yield!) facts, I have learned that medicine is marked by a process of endless striving. There will always be illnesses that deceive me and patients that I cannot successfully treat, just like there will be SketchyMicro videos that I cannot place and names of arteries that I cannot remember. But when I experience feelings of self-doubt, [I'll recall] *Grant me strength, time, and opportunity, always to correct what I have acquired, always to extend its domain.*

So, I return to my friend at the red light once more. I doubt I will ever find the feeling of preparedness that I seek, but in my striving, *knowledge is immense and the spirit of man can extend infinitely.*