

Like Mother, Like Daughter

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Around the holidays last year, a medical school classmate of mine expressed how glad he was that his mother had stepped away from her career as a physician to ensure that she would be home for the holidays when he and his siblings were growing up. I understood his feelings. I was the toddler opening gifts on Christmas morning when my mother's beeper rang out among background holiday music. I was the child skeptically wondering how we could celebrate a day late "because Santa knows Mom is working." I was the teenager hoping that no woman decided to have a baby on Christmas morning so that I could enjoy the holiday with my own mother around.

In those moments, I might have told you that I wished, above all else, that she could be home with us; that I wished she had chosen a career that allowed her to spend every Christmas morning with her family, without the intrusion of pagers or patients. I might have vowed to never pursue a career that would mean I might not be home for Christmas.

It was not just Christmas that she missed. There were bedtime stories, music recitals, hockey games, and college tours. There were birthdays celebrated in the hospital cafeteria, opening gifts suspiciously wrapped in hospital gift shop bags. There were school functions attended last minute in scrubs with stained clogs. There were carpool rides to soccer practice with teammates when I writhed in agony as she returned patient phone calls clarifying the amount of bleeding or fluid they were leaking.

There were good times, too. On postcall mornings she would bring home chocolate croissants from the hospital for breakfast. I would look forward to this so much that I was excited when I did not see her at night because that meant chocolate in the morning. There were hospital call-room sleepovers when a sitter could not be found. This meant endless access to a remote control and parental supervision only when no one was laboring. No family had better Halloween pumpkins than ours. Operating room tools work much better than the flimsy plastic options that most amateur carvers use. There was the time she used those same surgical skills to sew the names of every kindergartener in my class onto a tree skirt as a gift for my teacher.

As I matured, I started to appreciate the career that my mother had chosen. I slowly forgave her for each of those missed memories, realizing how many lives she had affected over the course of my own. I listened with pride, not envy, when we were approached by her patients at the grocery store, who would show me baby pictures of all the now-grown children my mother had delivered. I began to hope that my own career would one day be as meaningful as that which she had chosen.

When I decided to go into medicine, my mother dug out her dusty copy of Bates and found an otoscope she had not seen since medical school. She taught me how to tie square knots with her shoelaces on the back of an airplane seat during a flight home from winter vacation. She smiled when I showed her a picture of my first pager and laughed the first time I complained about it. She listened as I recounted my days on the wards, mixing up all of the important details, and she encouraged my fascination with things that will one day seem only routine. Along the way, I began to understand why she had chosen this career. Why it was worth juggling the demands of family life with the needs of her patients, even if that meant not always being home for the holidays.

There is no shortage of articles suggesting that many doctors would not encourage their children to pursue a career in medicine. Burnout is increasing, time spent with patients is decreasing; it is an epidemic that spans specialties, genders, and regions. Numerous surveys place physician burnout rates

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between 50 and 75% across specialties. For trainees the numbers are even higher, and female physicians are at least 1.5 times as likely as male physicians to report burnout.¹

In 1994, a physician survey indicated that more than 50% of physicians would not recommend medicine as a profession.² A 2018 survey found that number was as high as 70%.³ Those are scary statistics for anyone newly entering this field. Yet among all medical schools, about one in five matriculating students has a parent who is a doctor.⁴ Somehow the reality of knowing that my parents spend their evenings charting in the electronic medical record has not completely clouded the appeal of a career with as much meaning, intellectual stimulation, and purpose as medicine.

Furthermore, with the increase in physician burnout comes a parallel interest in the concept of resilience. Most broadly, resilience is the ability to respond to stress in a healthy way, with goals achieved at minimal physical and psychological cost.⁵ A recent article examining OBGYN resident resilience notes that resilience is informed by background and personal goals and influenced by surrounding culture. It notes the unique pressures inherent in the field of obstetrics and gynecology and highlights the importance of strong support from mentors in medicine and connections outside of medicine. It ultimately concludes that elements of physician resilience are present in other populations and include traits such as the ability to embrace physical and mental challenges and find meaning in these. It encourages a continued focus on personal motivations for entering the profession despite the daily challenges it can present, challenges like missing holidays, important events, and time with family.⁶

Strategies to enhance resilience are numerous and dynamic, though a common theme emerges: it is important to be able to appreciate a larger goal through the daily challenges and details.⁵ My mother hurried me to the hospital one morning during a particularly hectic school snow day. We rode the elevator to the labor floor, and I pointed out that she was wearing one brown shoe and one blue shoe. “I have

two shoes on,” she said, “That’s going to have to be good enough for today.”

Over the past 2 months, I have ridden many hospital elevators, thankfully with matching footwear. I am a fourth-year medical student finishing residency interviews and preparing for a career as an obstetrician–gynecologist; like mother, like daughter. Nearly every interviewer has asked me how her career has affected my own pursuits. I have struggled to disentangle my interests from hers, believing that my decision had to be entirely separate. The truth is, medicine, at its core, is an apprenticeship profession. We are all shaped by mentors and advocates along the way. Sometimes the people teaching us how to tie square knots are the same ones who taught us how to tie our shoes. I look forward to starting this journey, even if it means missing birthdays, hockey games, and holidays. This year we celebrated Christmas a day late. Mom was on call.

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