

Lessons From Our Learners

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Feature Editor

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Going Home

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As I approach the farm, I notice the fence around the cornfield is tipping quite dramatically. In places it is nearly lying flat, and grass has begun to hide even the top row of wire. No one has been out to check on it in some time. There are no animals left to pen in anyhow. I turn onto the gravel path. The corn crib needs painting; they have finally torn down the old shed that had been progressively collapsing under its own weight for decades. I'm not even halfway up the driveway before the front door opens. They have obviously been waiting for me.

My mother comes out and waves in her brief but excited manner. She chases a black and white cat off the porch. My father follows her out in his familiar blue coveralls and dirty brown leather boots. As he descends the steps, I notice a limp in his walk I've not seen before.

I stop the car, take a deep breath, and hoping that this visit will go better than the last get out to greet them. Mom is the first to hug me as always and inquires if I'm hungry. Dad waits patiently for his turn. His hair is grayer and his frame smaller than I remembered it.

They help me carry my suitcases into the house, and we sit down for coffee and cinnamon rolls my mother has baked. They tell me about the year's bumper crop. My father tells me that corn went to \$3.25 a bushel. I no longer have the frame of reference to understand if this is tragically low or wonderfully high so I just nod in a knowing manner. My mother shares a laundry list of neighbors who have retired or died. I recognize most of the names but can only picture a few faces.

"What's new with you?" my father asks. I think about the research project that I have just gotten into the patient enrollment phase. I think about the lecture on hemolytic anemia I am preparing for grand rounds next week. The face of the 84-year-old man when I recently told him he has lung cancer. I manage to come out with, "Not much, just working a lot." They

both nod, crestfallen. Several uncomfortable moments of silence pass. Soon we are addressing the weather.

How could it possibly be that I can't hold a 5-minute conversation with my own parents? I spent the first 18 years of my life with them. At work I don't have a tough time talking with colleagues, and I pride myself on the quality of my interactions with patients. So how could it be that I am so tongue-tied with my own family? What happened to me, that in a few short years, I have become a stranger in my own home? What, in that short amount of time, could possibly change a person from a beloved son into just a familiar face?

There was no doubt that achieving my dream of becoming a family physician had come at a huge price. Somehow, somewhere during medical school and residency I had seemed to have drifted away from almost everyone that I loved. Ironically, the process of mastering family medicine had isolated me from my own family. While learning the complexities of the biopsychosocial model, I had become my own teaching case. Biologically I had become slightly overweight, I had

(Fam Med 2008;40(10):700-1.)

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psychologically become moderately depressed, and I had socially become quite isolated.

As a residency faculty member, I have become driven by the need to learn and to teach. The amount of medical literature is increasing at a stunning rate. New drugs are being released constantly, and companies are bombarding the airwaves with direct marketing campaigns. The Internet has become home to thousands of Web sites dedicated to health and wellness. Patients are coming in after doing extensive amounts of research on the Web but not always having gotten the message quite right. How will we ever possibly be able to prepare today's residents well enough in 3 short years comprised of 80-hour work weeks? How can they ever see enough patients when they need to go home after a mere 30 hours? My instinct is to constantly challenge them. I want them to learn everything possible. I want them to read voraciously. I want them to see as many patients as humanly possible every day. Just like a parent who wants his children to have it better than he did, I want my residents to be better trained and better prepared than I was upon graduation.

But then in the whirling dervish mixture of information, education,

patient care—a moment of clarity. I sit across from one of my interns and see her 3 years from now, sitting across from her mother. The two of them are staring at each other, each realizing the immensity of the chasm that lies between their worlds. How removed each is from the other's daily existence. This isn't what I want in their futures.

It is easy to inquire how learners are progressing professionally. How many hours a week did you average on the last rotation? Did you work over 30 hours straight at any given time? What did your evaluation say you needed to improve on? Did you meet your learning objectives? Did you identify any areas where you feel you'll need extra work?

I am not always as good at asking about residents' progression in other areas of their lives. I ask another set of important questions much less often. What non-medical literature have you read in the last month? When was the last time you and your spouse went out for a dinner date? What hobbies have you engaged in lately? What personal goals do you have during residency?

I remember the silence filling my parent's kitchen. I am learning to value residents' ability to keep in touch with their family as much as their ability to read an EKG. I work

hard to look beyond my learners' white coats and see the mother, son, husband, or sister underneath.

That visit home was 7 years ago. I am better now. It was not easy. I had to build a curriculum for myself to fill in some gaps that residency had missed. I had to learn, or re-learn, some important skills that had atrophied in residency. I had to take self-directed courses like "How to Be a Good Husband" and "Being a Father to Your Children." I needed a refresher on "Talking With Non-medical Individuals" and had to start completely over on once-mastered topics like "Relaxation and Taking Time for Yourself." However, I have studied these hard and am finding once again that well-rounded individual who went off to medical school 15 years ago or am at least well on my way to a full recovery. And yes, I do watch the price of corn.

Acknowledgments: The opinions or assertions contained herein are the private views of the author and are not to be construed as official or as reflecting the views of the Department of Defense.

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