Lessons From Our Learners

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The Heart of Family Medicine

Luna Xu

I was an aspiring engineer when I first started college. However, gradually I found that I was more interested in interacting with real people than running simulations on machines. While I was unsure whether to switch to medicine for graduate school, an opportunity to observe a family physician came up. The experience I had in shadowing Dr J not only convinced me that I wanted to pursue medicine, but it also taught me about life and the art of compassion. Now, as a second-semester junior in college, I am preparing for my medical school entrance exam with the hope that one day I will become a family physician like Dr J.

Lesson 1: Don’t just tell the patients you care about them; rather, demonstrate you do by actions

Arthur was a 60-year old patient whom Dr J has seen for the past 5 years. During his recent visit, Dr J noticed Arthur was wearing the same hat he wore the last time.

“Arthur, you like that hat very much, don’t you? You wear it every time you come to see me!” Dr J greeted the patient while entering the room.

“Yes I do, Dr J,” smiled the patient.

I was surprised that Dr J remembered such details about a patient, given that she treated so many on a daily basis. Genuine care is not merely two words; rather it is the action of recognizing each patient’s individuality. While performing the regular respiratory system examinations, Dr J continued to chat with the patient to ease any anxiety he may have been experiencing. By the time Arthur was getting ready to leave, Dr J patted him on the back and told him to be extra careful of the harsh winter weather. As I waved goodbye to the patient, I jotted down these notes on my clipboard: a pat on the back and a sincere recognition of the interest of patients comforts the hearts no less than the most powerful drugs.

Prior to observing Dr J, I never imagined that doctors would take time to remember patients’ birthdays, yet this is just another aspect of how Dr J demonstrated her love and care. Dr J has a policy of calling all patients 85 years and older on their birthdays. Not only does the doctor write down all the dates on her calendar early on in the year, she also manages to fit the calling time into her busy schedule. Even though it is not required of her, she feels it is a necessary part of family medicine. The little details Dr J performs besides simply treating patients within the hospital environment demonstrates once more the golden rule that an action of love is a thousand times better than just talking about it.

Lesson 2: Family medicine treats patients from a holistic perspective

The American Holistic Medical Association states that “Holistic health care practitioners view people as the unity of body, mind, spirit, and the systems in which they live.” This is indeed one of the most important philosophies of family medicine. Both common sense and empirical evidence indicate that one’s psychological state is closely related to one’s physical well-being. By observing Dr J, I saw how the theories of biopsych-
chosocial approach were applied in practice.

Mrs White has been Dr J’s patient for more than 10 years. The doctor knows all her family stories and personally knows Mrs White’s sons, daughters, and even her grandchildren. She is like part of the White’s family. Throughout the patient’s physician visit, the mutual trust and respect Dr J shares with her patient made a deep impression on me. Family physicians know the patient so well and for so long that they are able to discern any small deviations from the patient’s normal behavior. As shown from the research on physician involvement with psychosocial concerns of patients, a close physician-patient relationship and patient-centered interviewing improve patient satisfaction, patient compliance, and medical outcome. Family doctors not only care for patients as individuals but also work in reaching out to the family and being part of the family.

Lesson 3: Being a physician is a very rewarding career

Dr J keeps a small gift bag full of letters in her office. The letters were written in all kinds of languages, such as Spanish, Vietnamese, Chinese, etc. They are part of a special deal Dr J made with her non-English speaking patients. Every time they came in, they would bring a sheet with five sentences written in their languages. In return, Dr J would teach them five English sentences. As Dr J puts it, “The patients are more relaxed and eager to talk to you this way, and I enjoy learning about their cultures as well!” By learning the home languages of the patients and teaching the patients English, Dr J places herself at an equal position in the small language exchange program. The empowered patients, in return, are clearly more willing to open up with their physician.

When I opened Dr J’s gift bag, I saw love poured out in different languages around the world and across generations. My favorites were the ones from the kids. Sometimes they were too young to write a complete sentence, but they would not want to give up the opportunity to communicate. Kids use their creative mind to draw illustrative pictures and write simple words next to them, like a picture book. I couldn’t help but giggle in Dr J’s office as I imagined the cute little kids struggling to decide which color to use in creating their beautiful masterpiece of a house, a bird, or a rainbow. A doctor who spreads love to her patients enjoys the patients’ corresponded love abundantly. When a little 5-year-old child named Shawn came in with his mother last Thursday, spreading his arms wide open to grab Dr J’s leg, it became clear to me that family medicine was what I want to do.

My shadowing experience in family medicine taught me that there is a lot more to medicine than the phrase “helping other people” can summarize. Family medicine is not about curing the disease; it is about curing the person. Patients are individuals. They are not referred to as “the one with the high blood pressure,” but by their first and last names, their habits, their birthdays, and their families. Dr J demonstrated to me how to connect with people from different backgrounds and establish a trusted physician-patient relationship.

Just as actions are better than words, observing a doctor is far better than simply imagining what it is like being a doctor. My shadowing experience helped me tremendously in reaching the decision to become a doctor. The experience enriched my understanding of medicine, family medicine in particular. Shadowing Dr J helped me gain a deeper understanding of family medicine from the physician’s perspective. I really hope that more and more hospitals will open their doors to premedical students and allow them similar opportunities to observe physicians in practice. The experience will not only aid the students in making career choices but also give them a real appreciation of what is at the “heart of family medicine.”

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