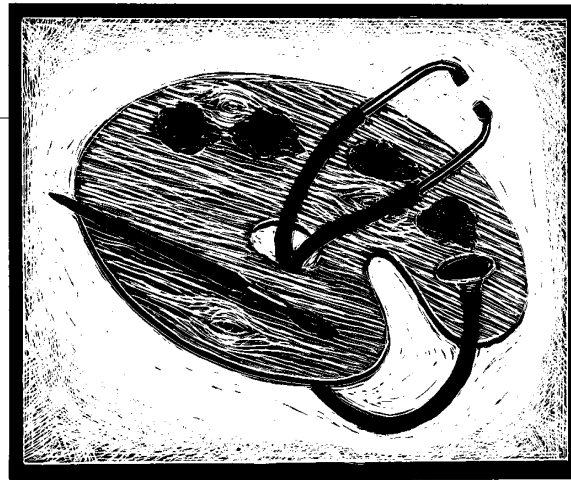


Mentors in medicine

By Pamela Kunz



NICHOLE BENNETT

I now know what I want to be when I grow up. One could argue that I should have known this when I applied to medical school. Yes, I knew that I wanted to be a doctor. But back then, and during the first few years of medical school, medicine was defined as the acquisition of detailed knowledge in anatomy, biochemistry, pathology, and physiology—the science of medicine. I have since come to realize that the practice of medicine is more an art than a science. I have learned this art not from textbooks, but from teachers, mentors, and role models. I now know the *kind* of physician I

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want to be and would like to model my behavior after the men and women who have served as my mentors during my time at DMS.

Collegial: Dartmouth Medical School provides a collegial and nurturing environment in which to learn and ample opportunities for mentoring and being mentored. From the basic science and “On Doctoring” classes in the preclinical years through the clinical clerkships, electives, and research activities, students have many opportunities to work closely with faculty and administrators who are committed to quality medical education. I have been fortunate to encounter many such mentors during my medical school experiences.

Physician and author Robert Coles writes about mentoring in his book *A Call to Service*. He describes it as a mix of friendship, instruction, guidance, and inspiration. He further explores the meaning of the word “mentor” in the context of Greek literary and religious history. “Mentor was the friend of Odysseus who became an important person in the life of Odysseus’ son, Telemachus. He was an instructor, a moral example, a wise and revered figure. It is said that the goddess Athena entered Mentor, presumably to help him do his work; her divine inspiration became Mentor’s wonderfully animated infectious capacity to help a young man grow and find his way.”

Value: During a fourth-year elective in clinical genetics, I worked with a pediatrician in Lancaster County, Penn., who cares for Amish and Mennonite children with rare genetic disorders. He was, perhaps, an unlikely mentor. Sequestered in a rural farming community, he has devoted his life’s work to the study of disorders that many physicians never encounter, often challenging his colleagues and questioning the basic tenets of medicine. However, the value of my experience with him was immeasurable. I learned of his humanitarian efforts, unyielding compassion, and scientific curiosity. These values have universal appeal. In a letter to me he wrote: “It is good for me to think that some of what you saw and read here will stay with you. Much of

what I have done in the past 25 years has evolved from a few important experiences and friendships, from careful studies of unusual cases, and from repeated efforts to understand, explain, gain insight into illness, biology, and people. If you appreciate the value of this aspect of my work, then I think your time here was worthwhile.”

The way in which he approaches the practice of medicine is one that I admire and hope someday to emulate. His work, his writings, and his values have taught me the meaning of service. He saw the need to serve the Amish and Mennonite children by provid-

ing them with improved access to care. He could see that his work would make a difference in their lives and felt a great responsibility to them. He built them a clinic, drives miles to make house calls, and struggles daily to better understand the biology of their disorders. He has offered himself to others and, in doing so, has transformed his community. I aspire to find a calling that provides me with a similar sense of satisfaction. He inspires me to do great things.

Remarkable influence: I have learned in medical school about the most recent discoveries in basic science, the newest therapeutic options and diagnostic modalities. Yet the cumulative knowledge from these scientific advances does not equal the power of one mentor. Educator Christa McAuliffe advocated the benefits of teaching; she said, “I touch the future, I teach.” The potential for a teacher, a mentor, to influence and direct the life of a student is as remarkable as any scientific discovery. Through the example of my mentors, I have learned how to better serve the needs of a patient and family, deliver bad news with sensitivity and compassion, and help dying patients to preserve their dignity. I have learned the value of mentors in the context of medical education.

I hope to become a well-informed diagnostician, an astute scientist, an empathetic communicator, and an effective educator—skilled in the art *and* the science of medicine. I have been given the unique privilege of helping people, the full extent of which I am just beginning to appreciate. I look forward to serving the many people who will need me in the years to come and aspire to provide them with the high-quality and ethical care that they deserve. To those who have been my teachers, mentors, and role models at DMS—thank you. Your legacy is in your students. We will be better physicians for your friendship, instruction, guidance, and inspiration. ■

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