

EDITOR'S PAGE

Mentors

It is the “fellowship mating” season, and our halls are filled with residents interviewing for our cardiology fellowship program. As part of the ritual, I am frequently consulted by our own medical residents as to what attributes they should look for in a training program and how they can select the best institution to prepare them for a productive career. My answer is getting increasingly simpler. Accepting the significance of a good patient mix, a large number of procedures, diverse and productive research laboratories, and so on, I am more than ever convinced that the most important ingredient to preparing a successful career is an excellent mentor. In my opinion, the ability to serve as a great mentor is one of the most underestimated and underappreciated skills in medicine.

An excellent mentor is important to those who plan to devote themselves primarily to the practice of clinical medicine. Perhaps better characterized as a “role model,” an outstanding mentor can provide not only a comprehensive knowledge base and procedural skills, but also the sage clinical judgment that signifies the superior clinician. Perhaps of even greater importance, a mentor can convey a “philosophy of practice,” including the optimal interaction with patients and physician colleagues, a regimen for remaining current with advances in the field, and a sound concept of how the practice of medicine fits into a full life. A supportive mentor can also provide guidance in selecting the best practice opportunity and can maintain a close relationship for many years.

As important as a good mentorship is to the clinician, it is even more critical to the success of the academician. In addition to conveying clinical prowess, the mentor must provide the investigative expertise that will enable a productive research career. Laboratory skills must be taught, as well as the investigative mindset to ask the right questions, design the appropriate protocols, and analyze the results correctly. Writing a manuscript that appropriately and convincingly presents the studies and findings must also be mastered. Mentoring an aspiring academician is a demanding task, and requires a skill set for the teacher over and above that required to be successful investigators themselves.

The expertise that must be transmitted by an accomplished mentor and mastered by an eager trainee is summarized very well in an American College of Cardiology Heart House course organized by Valentin Fuster, titled “How to Become a Cardiovascular Investigator.” This highly praised symposium covers specific issues required to be a productive researcher in a broad spectrum of individual areas ranging from interventional cardiology to genomics and proteomics. Important lectures are devoted to obtaining grants, writing a paper, and finding a job. The key subject discussed, at least in my opinion, is how to choose a mentor; if you are successful at this task, the rest will be taken care of.

My own personal experience has been that a mentor can provide so much more than mere medical expertise. My mentor, Dean Mason, set a tone for how to navigate the often turbulent waters of academic medicine. He afforded opportunities within medicine that might never have been available otherwise, was a tireless cheerleader and encourager,



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and offered friendship and counsel outside of the professional setting. His many pithy sayings still often come to mind, such as “no one in a pissing contest stays dry.” The affirmation of his influence was that I tried to imitate him as much as possible, especially in my own role as mentor.

Given the complexity and importance of being a great mentor, it has always been my impression that this talent is not adequately appreciated and celebrated. At awards selections (and presentations), at promotion meetings, and when screening potential recruits, a detailed recitation of the candidate's publications, grants, and administrative positions is often followed by only a brief (if any) mention of his or her successful trainees. Nevertheless, the impact that trainees have on medicine is often the greatest contribution that a mentor makes to the field. For me, many of the most satisfying moments I have experienced in my life have been in conjunction with the achievements of those I have had a hand in training.

It is clear that being a mentor is one of the most important functions in medicine. A good mentor is almost

always crucial to the success of a trainee. Moreover, multiple skills are required to be an excellent mentor, and like most other talents, these are found in abundance in a relatively modest number of individuals. A mentor has to skillfully transmit not only codified medical expertise, but also a variety of intangibles that help to make the trainee a facile academician as well as a complete person. That this critically important function does not appear to be more highly valued and celebrated continues to astound me, but I intend to lobby for greater recognition. So, it is very easy for me to respond to a resident when asked what qualities to seek in a cardiology fellowship. I just tell them to go for the one with the best proven mentors.

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