

My Goals in Medicine

by James W. Foong

I was asked to present this topic to a group of physicians and researchers at a medical conference in West Vancouver, British Columbia. What can I offer them that they do not already know? I felt that my talk could seem very self-centered, arrogant even. Such were my insecurities but out of sheer necessity, I began organizing my thoughts in an orderly manner for the presentation. What I realized was that the very reason we're in this field gets lost amidst our hectic lives and the daily struggles that make us lose sight of our goals. Every once in a while, we may need a reminder to put us back on the right path.

Before exploring individualistic goals, what is the purpose of medicine in the first place? According to the Hastings Centre, there are 4 goals:

1. The prevention of disease and injury and the promotion and maintenance of health
2. The relief of pain and suffering caused by maladies
3. The cure of those with a malady and the care of those who cannot be cured
4. The avoidance of premature death and the pursuit of a peaceful death

Essentially, the medical profession strives to relieve suffering and this can be thought of as the primary objective. As medicine is such a broad spectrum of pursuits, I divided the subject into 5 main arms: clinician, communicator, professional, scholar and health advocate.

1. As a clinician, I should be competent in taking a good history, carrying out a thorough and thoughtful physical examination. Then, coming up with a

differential diagnosis, carrying out investigations to confirm (or eliminate) the diagnosis and designing a therapeutic plan for the patient. Since I am just starting my clinical training, this is especially pertinent to me. I'm fond of the words of Sir William Osler, 'He who studies medicine without books sails an uncharted sea, but he who studies medicine without patients does not go to sea at all.'

2. Since patient interaction is at the crux of our practice, it is imperative that we can function effectively as communicators. Building an understanding, trusting, empathetic and confidential relationship with our patients enables us to deliver information successfully. Good health has many facets. Therefore, teamwork with other healthcare providers plays a fundamental role in delivering the best patient care possible. It is said that 'The good physician treats the disease; the great physician treats the patient who has the disease.'

3. As a professional, values such as altruism, honesty, integrity, respect and compassion are significant to our profession as a doctor and human being. Part of being a professional involves us being updated on current developments in our fields but not forgetting personal development in order to grow as a person and to be as close to the best version of ourselves that we can be. Some things cannot change but instead we should have the wisdom to know what can be changed and have the courage to do so.

4. We also have roles as scholars; carrying out research to pass on valuable information so that future generations may benefit and grow as a whole. Passing on information may also be done in the form of mentoring upcoming individuals with passion in a certain field. On an individual basis, each of us has the responsibility of being life-long learners, to be curious and be capable of critical inquiries.

5. Whether we like it or not, the local community looks to us as health advocates. As such, we should be familiar with the principles of disease prevention and seek to gently nudge our patients into altering behavior that impacts their health; all the while maintaining respect for the diversity that our patients have and using epidemiological evidence to guide our advice. Finally, we can give back to our local society by participating in community activities, especially those that promote a healthy wellbeing.

Francis Peabody's iconic essay delivered to the Harvard Medical School students in 1926 and published in JAMA is a great guide for me and a source of immense insight,

“The good physician knows his patients through and through, and his knowledge is bought dearly. Time, sympathy and understanding must be lavishly dispensed, but the reward is to be found in that personal bond which forms the greatest satisfaction of the practice of medicine. One of the essential qualities of the clinician is interest in humanity, for the secret of the care of the patient is in caring for the patient.”

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