

Advice to 4th Years on Their Way to Residency

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I've been asked to pass on advice, especially to those of you going on to clinical careers. At my life/career stage (Baby Boomer age 70) it dawned on me that my generation of physicians will be passing on our personal pathology as patients more than our wisdom as fellow physicians. I therefore have no advice, but I do have a story and a few prayers.

Dartmouth Medical School when I left in 1970 gave me a very strong basic medical science foundation for not only the last two medical school years but also for my surgical residency, all in Boston. During my clinical rotations there I often heard the Dr. Francis W. Peabody quote: "One of the essential qualities of the clinician is interest in humanity, the secret of the care of the patient is in caring for the patient". My residency chief, Dr. Frances D. Moore, had the following quote hung over the door of our surgical library: "The fundamental act of medical care is the assumption responsibility". I'm not sure I really understood the meaning of those quotes until I became a patient twenty years after my residency. About the same time there was a Hollywood movie starring actor William Hurt called The Doctor. It was about a surgeon getting cancer, how he dealt with it and how it changed his mindset. I didn't have cancer, but I presented urgently with a severe disease in my own specialty, General Surgery. I found myself cared for by my closest partners. Informed and shared decision-making is a good thing, but what I really needed then were physicians who would selflessly care for me and for one of them be the team leader. Someone who would take responsibility and guide me through those informed and shared decisions. Someone to assume full responsibility for my care. Care can be given as a team, but it has to be a military team. Sports teams may work in playing games. Disease is war.

I practiced almost another twenty years after that illness and recovery with a new perspective on those quotes. I think I became a better doctor after the experience like actor William Hurt did in the movie. I pray that you don't become a patient, but that you think like a patient. Patients in general are smart and how and what they think of you eventually becomes based on the true facts of your own performance and personality. Those facts become your ultimate strength or your ultimate weakness. I pray that you welcome the assumption of full responsibility in the caring of your future patients.