

Motherhood in Medicine: A Rebellious Act?

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My grandmother “Beba” was a family medicine doctor who had 12 kids. When asked how many children she had, she would answer, “I have a boy and a girl” and never say how many of each.

I recently began to ponder the strange dichotomy of my grandmother advocating for female independence and self-reliance while also having 12 children. As a mother and family doctor myself, I could not imagine how she could parent 12 children while simultaneously caring for her patients.

Beba completed her residency in New Orleans in a different era. In 1952, wards for Black people were separated from those for white people. If a laboring Black woman came into the hospital and the wards for Black people were full, she would have to give birth on a gurney outside the ward instead of being offered a bed in the white wards. Following residency, Beba went on to practice medicine on the Navajo reservation in Arizona, where she was inspired to birth all her kids without the usual pain-relieving drugs.

As I navigate motherhood and doctorhood, I have so many questions I’d like to ask my 99-year-old Beba. What is the secret to effectively navigating the worlds of motherhood and doctorhood? Is there a breaking point where one identity takes priority? How does one find time to give back to themselves within the daily chaos?

In my experience, the medical field is set up in a way that discourages people from having kids. There is barely time to care for oneself, let alone finding time to care for our own children. I’m sitting here typing this on my rotation in a different city away from my family, having mixed emotions: guilt that I’m away from my kids, and also appreciation for having some time for myself because, in everyday life, I am rarely alone. I am a mother giving to my kids, a spouse giving to my partner, a doctor giving to my patients, but the day ends quickly and there’s little time left for me.

We are told we can’t do both medicine and start a family. We are told our career will suffer for it – that we’ll likely drop out and never return. I didn’t have kids during medical school as a radical act, but it is an act that defies the standard path to becoming a physician. It makes me wonder if Beba’s large family was, in part, an act of rebellion too.

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