



Perspective/Opinion

A reflection on four years of medical school

By Sharadhi Thalner, MD – Medical Student

In this essay, Sharie reflects on her experiences both personally and professionally as a first-year versus a fourth-year medical student and the transformation that these four years have elicited.

“Sharie, I think it’s time you saw your first patient,” my clinical apprenticeship mentor declared one morning in the middle of my first year of medical school. I remember the rush of adrenaline that overcame me at those words. I rifled through the collection of notes and worksheets I had stuffed in my backpack, all detailing the right questions to ask during an interview and the format of an H&P. I desperately tried to cram the H&P template that had recently been introduced to me into my brain. Was I ready? What if the patient noticed that I had never done this before? I mean, I *had* never done this before.

I took a deep breath, looked at my mentor with an expression that must have resembled sheer terror and said, “Sure...but can you give me the easiest patient on your schedule?”

My mentor chuckled, told me I’d do fine, and sent me on my way to see his simplest patient of the day: a child six weeks out from recovery of a distal radius fracture.

“Hi...I am Sharie? I am a medical student...do you mind if I talk with you?” I asked awkwardly as I entered the exam room. I asked some of the right questions, forgot others, and did not follow the appropriate outline for an H&P. When I returned and presented what I could, my mentor told me I did a fantastic job and encouraged me to keep going. So that is what I did.

That first year of medical school involved much diffidence, not just in clinic and class but in my personal life too. I recently moved from my college on-campus apartment back to my parent’s house to save money. To me, the transition felt like a regression back to high school. After a day at the library studying, I was expected to be home to set the table and help my mother prepare dinner. My family and I would sit together each night for a meal and Mom and Dad would ask me how my day went. I was blessed with endless emotional support from extremely loving parents who offered me the comforts of home, but I felt suffocated. I had no idea who I was as an individual and ached to go out into the world and find out.

Four years of medical school flew by. The second year felt like a barrage of exams during which I found within myself dedication and perseverance that I had never known existed. Third year honed my communication skills, introduced in me a sense of maturity, and elevated my sense of empathy as I saw patients each day in the clinical world. The fourth year was a slew of sub-internships, residency applications, and an uneasy sense of foreboding towards Match Day. Along the way I moved out of my

parents' house, adopted a cat, and recovered my long-lost love for playing the piano.

The last patient I saw during medical school was a teenage girl complaining of knee pain with activity. That day in pediatric rheumatology clinic I had comfortably seen several kids with lupus and juvenile arthritis. I had helped teach the third-year student on the rotation how to do a thorough joint exam and had presented a short report on systemic sclerosis for journal club. I entered my final patient's exam room and introduced myself to the girl and her mother in the routine way I had hundreds of times before. I ran through the H&P that was now ingrained in my head like the back of my hand. I conversed casually with the patient and her mother during the physical exam to ease discomfort. By the end of the exam, I knew this was classic patellofemoral syndrome.

I considered checking with my attending before continuing, but then realized I was confident in my diagnosis. I explained to the patient and her mom what I thought was going on and answered all their questions. "It never occurred to me that this might be what's wrong. Thanks for explaining it to us, that was brilliant," the mom thanked me as I left the room to get my attending.

I held my breath as my attending performed her physical exam and only released it when she declared that this was indeed patellofemoral syndrome. At the end of the visit, the patient's mom again referred to me as she told my attending, "Your medical student did a fantastic job. If she were a couple of years further along, she would be our pediatrician!" I spent the rest of my last day in medical school beaming, over the moon that I was able to use the skills that I had spent four years toiling over to finally help a patient.

The following month I was thrilled to match into pediatric residency in a brand new city, eager to face the freedoms and responsibilities of living far from home. I recently took a solo trip to what will soon be my new home, signed a lease on my first ever solo apartment, and toured the hospital where I'll be employed for my first real job. As I anticipate the next chapter in my training, I reflect on all the growth that these four years of medical school have brought me and know that I am ready for whatever obstacles are awaiting.

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