



Perspective/Opinion

Students of Medicine

By Andrew Kastenmeier, MD

"I apologize for the brevity of this message, but I wanted to disseminate this information as quickly and clearly as possible."

This was the first line of a message that I wrote to the surgery clerkship students on March 13, 2020. Reading this message 2 years later transported me back, and I could sense the uneasiness that I felt at that time welling up. At the start of each surgery clerkship, I explain to the students that I want their experience to be challenging. However, I would never have expected or wished for the challenges that arose in early 2020. It has only been 2 years, but I had already forgotten the context of our lives and the uncertainty that existed on that date. There were not yet any recommendations regarding masks, and in fact there was such a shortage of masks that most of the public could not get one even if they wanted. COVID testing had been around for about a month and was not widely available, there were no restrictions on gathering in groups, and neither treatments nor vaccines were on our radar yet.

On March 13, 2020, we were informed that students could no longer participate in operating room cases. This policy was not instituted as a direct effort to reduce spread of the virus. Rather, there was a massive institutional push to conserve PPE due to the shortages at our hospitals. There was disappointment among most students, but not a single complaint. The students were understanding, and they willingly sacrificed a portion of their clinical experiences to assist with PPE conservation.

On March 17, 2020 at 5:00 PM it became official, MCW halted all clinical experiences for students. In a frustrating demonstration of irony, the most significant worldwide health crisis of our time had led to the cessation of formal medical education. That afternoon, I went up to the student work room on 12-CFAC. The surgical ward felt as quiet and empty as I could ever recall (little did I know that it would become even more so in the coming weeks). I found two students collecting their jackets and bags, preparing to leave. The tone of our conversation was shared disbelief. It seemed impossible that something could bring clinical care to a near

standstill and formal medical education to a grinding halt. This was the last time I saw a student face-to-face for several months.

In my first virtual meeting with the students, they were most interested in updates about the local implications of the pandemic. Is the hospital full of patients with COVID? How sick are people getting? Are hospital workers getting sick? The other pressing concern was about completing their medical education and gaining appropriate clinical experience. Clinical care for most students is the reason they went to medical school. The patient interactions, the interpersonal relationships, the work-ups, the treatment plans, and the challenge of putting it all together; these are the things that most students want experience when they are on clerkships, and these are the things that they have been waiting to experience since the day they started medical school. Having had several months of experience with clinical patient care and then having it taken away was a significant disappointment. It also raised doubts in the minds of many students. Have I learned enough to take care of patients; will I be a good doctor? These are questions that most medical students struggle with even when their education isn't interrupted by a global pandemic.

In the most delightful display of irony, the cessation of formal medical education during the pandemic revealed what it takes to be an excellent student of medicine. Let me explain. No one is a finished product at the moment of medical school graduation. The growth, the learning, the self-reflection, and the improvement continues. The end of medical school isn't the end of one's medical education, it is the start of your self-directed, independent medical education. At graduation we are no longer medical students, but we remain students of medicine. When MCW medical students graduate, we want them to have some foundational knowledge and skill, but what we should hope for most is that we have fostered the idea that they must be devoted to continuing their medical education throughout their career. When formal medical education paused for the pandemic, we saw that our students have the tools to do just as we would hope. They showed the resilience, the desire, the flexibility, the creativity, and the commitment to continue their education when opportunities were no longer available. They proved at a very early stage, in the most important ways, that they are ready to be the physicians, the students of medicine, we are proud to call MCW alumni.

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