



Perspective

Reflecting on Medical School and Residency

By Buba Marong, MD

It has been quite the journey, these past seven years. As I conclude what I considered to be the most meaningful endeavor of my adult life, I am filled with a range of emotions, but perhaps the sentiment that overshadows them all is GRATITUDE. I am eternally grateful for the opportunity and privilege to realize this childhood goal of mine in this faraway land. A land so far away from where I grew up, yet it never quite feels foreign to me. America always feels like home to me because I consider myself so lucky to have crossed paths with some amazing human beings; human beings whose impact on my growth - both personally and professionally – has been immeasurable.

“Buba! Very nice to meet you.” That was how Jennifer Haluzak, then the admission coordinator at the Medical College of Wisconsin (MCW), greeted me during our first encounter when interviewing for a position in the Class of 2018. I usually remark that it doesn’t bother me at all when folks butcher my name, and I mean that. But there was something about how perfectly she pronounced my name that made me feel right at home. That sentiment of feeling right home would stay with me throughout medical school. I am painfully cognizant of race relations in America, and I must admit that I mentally prepared myself to tackle both the overt and covert issues in medical school and residency. Fortunately, it was preparation that I never needed, for all my interactions have been filled with genuine and mutual respectful curiosity and admiration.

It should be no surprise then that residency selection was an easy choice for me. Medical College of Wisconsin Affiliated Hospitals (MCWAH) was my number one and only choice. I knew if I was willing to put in the work and time, I could garner the requisite skillset necessary to become the kind of physician that I knew I wanted to be. I was lucky to be surrounded by colleagues and educators who are just as passionate about their craft as I am. There is something special about the Internal Medicine residency class of 2021. As a function of my family obligations, I didn’t get to interact with folks that much outside of work, but there is an indescribable warmth about this class and an eagerness to be there for each other. I will greatly miss listening to Curren’s quiet wisdom, catching up with Kam in the hallways about family, and Matt giving me a hard time about that one award that he thought I stole from him.

When I look back at my residency, though, perhaps the turning point for me was formative feedback I received from my favorite attending and mentor, Dr. Jayshil Patel. I had solicited feedback at the end of a rotation, and he told me to be “comfortable with being uncomfortable.” He went on to elaborate that true growth only comes about through putting oneself through intellectually uncomfortable situations. I took that to heart and read the entire Annals of Internal Medicine Clinic Series (for example) to shore up my foundational knowledge. I re-read basic biochemistry again (at least the components with pertinent clinical applicability). I was appreciative of that formative feedback. At the time, I didn’t understand it as being “called out” for becoming complacent, and there was a reason for that, which brings me to my final point and a challenge to all my fellow educators.

Giving trainees formative feedback should be considered a privilege. A privilege that is only earned after establishing with said trainee that you genuinely care for their personal and professional growth. Take some time to get to know your trainees. What drives them to do what they do? What are their biggest fears? What makes them happy and/or sad? Have they lost someone close to them recently or in the past? Is their family doing okay? I am fervent believer that if the very first time that you have any meaningful non-work-related conversation with a trainee is to give them feedback, the chance that those tips will land on a receptive ear is slim to none. Instead, the sentiment you expressed will merely serve as a fodder for venting to the next willing listener that the trainee can find.

To the graduating class of 2021, I challenge you all (myself included) to please use your new-found status and privilege in society for the common good. Start with the simple things: Be the best friend, partner, son, daughter, parent that you can be and let your north star always be DOING THE RIGHT THING!

Buba Marong, MD, founded the Marong Health Group with the goal of establishing quality and affordable primary health care clinics in Gambia. He is graduating from his Internal Medicine residency and will be practicing hospital medicine in the Milwaukee area.