

Mentors in Medicine

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You can get everything in life you want, if you will just help enough other people get what they want.
—Zig Zigler

I am fearful that mentoring is becoming a lost art in medicine and plastic surgery. Mentors in medicine are generally experienced physicians who go out of their way to help medical students, residents, and young physicians set important life goals and develop the skills to reach them. Mentoring is a powerful way for our young plastic surgeons to learn a variety of personal and professional skills.

Mentoring is one of the oldest forms of influence. Literature attributes the origin of the term “mentor” to Homer, one of the ancient Greek authors, who tells of the King of Ithaca asking his friend Mentor to look after his son Telemachus while he fought to win the Trojan War. In the past, the tradition of mentoring took the form of apprenticeships. More often now it takes the form of a coach or friend who listens, gives advice, or acts as a sounding board. Mentors can be peers, family members, co-workers, teachers, or clergy. Most adults can identify a person who, at some time in their life, had a significant and positive impact on them.

Growing up in rural North Dakota, one of the most astounding things to me is that, other than my parents, I had very few mentors. I do, however, distinctly remember my science teacher in high school. He was my mentor, my role model, and someone I could always strive to emulate. Not only was he brilliant, he was also quick and eager to help his students become the best they could be. I still remember the work I did for him on the fruit fly. I carried many of those fruit flies home (much to the surprise of my parents) and cross-fertilized them to demonstrate Mendelian characteristics for transfer of the color of their eyes. This

teacher stimulated me to think, explore, and expand my knowledge into areas that were totally unfamiliar. More importantly, he served as a role model for establishing a work ethic that stayed with me throughout my life. He encouraged me daily to expand my knowledge in the sciences and to explore other areas outside science to become a better, more well-rounded student.

We all need mentors in both our personal and professional lives. Mentoring begins at home as children with our parents and continues during the early years of our lives with teachers and relatives. As we grow to adulthood, mentoring by others becomes a key element for personal career success. Nowhere is that more important than the early years of medical training. Mentoring can help the young surgeon achieve the ideals of experienced, highly trained physicians. Observing the art and science of medicine practiced in an ethical environment helps young students learn how to plan their own professional careers.

Mentoring today is not easy with all the demands of an academic medical setting. We are asked to mentor not only residents and medical students but also research fellows and international visitors on occasion, all the while maintaining our focus on a professional commitment to our patients. However, the rewards of mentoring are great:

- You will learn from those you mentor as they stimulate you to challenge them.
- Mentoring gives you a chance to pay back your community and profession for some of the opportunities you were given.
- You have the opportunity to review and validate what you know and have accomplished through the years. Often you find that you

have accomplished much more than you thought.

- Mentoring can help you reorganize and re-define your own goals.
- You will feel satisfied and proud of the job you are doing.
- Most importantly, by mentoring you will leave the world a better place than you found it.

The best mentoring happens when we practice what we preach. Live your life, particularly your professional life, by example. This type of mentoring is subtler, yet far more profound than one-on-one didactic sessions. The best mentors do not even know they are mentoring. They simply go about each day leading their personal and professional lives in an honest, ethical manner with great integrity.

Young children begin to be mentored at home when they imitate the things they see us do. My daughter imitates her big brother. Sometimes that is good and sometimes not—it is something that requires careful monitoring! When done properly, parenthood is the ultimate form of mentoring and perhaps the greatest impact we will ever have on another person's life. Children emulate our attitudes and actions, both good and bad. Being a good parental mentor requires much selflessness and nurturing. However, the challenges and

responsibilities of being parents have made my wife and me much stronger. Life, indeed, is not a sprint—it is a marathon!

Mentoring involves developing a relationship to the point of trust. Gaining trust in a meaningful relationship requires skill and patience. The mentors I remember best have become lifelong friends. They have been there for me "rain or shine." They are the people I would want with me in any emergency.

Mentoring is becoming a lost art in medicine and plastic surgery. We need to make every effort to revive it. Take time to mentor young medical students, residents, and the newer members of your faculties and practices. Share your professional and personal life's wisdom with those younger and less experienced around you. Mentoring is one of the least expensive and most powerful ways to change the world, one life at a time.

Never doubt the ability of a small group of committed, thoughtful people to change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has!

—Margaret Mead

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