

Being Human in Medicine

Family, Health, Medicine

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We each have unique stories that have shaped us into who we are today and will impact the physicians we will become. I am from the small town of Random Island, Newfoundland, and Labrador. Following a degree in Recreation, Master's in Kinesiology, and almost a decade in the fitness industry working with healthy, ill, injured, athletic, and military populations, I was accepted into medicine at 29 after three attempts. Medicine is something I have always been passionate about. Reflecting, I think I delayed applying because I did not want to feel like a failure if I did not get accepted. Now, I realize the only failure is not going after what is important. I entered medical school with a girlfriend, 10-year-old stepdaughter, and week-old twins. I have a lot of responsibilities that humble and motivate me to be the best version of myself. I hope that sharing some of my story and personal perspectives about how I approach life and try to manage medicine, a family, and a healthy lifestyle offers some comfort, perspective, and inspiration into what it means to be human in medicine.

Being human in medicine starts with remembering the human condition. While the scientific and spiritual communities can debate what it means to be human, I have some ideas. In essence, it means *memento mori*, or in other words, we live and will eventually die, no exceptions. This humbling fact reminds us of the finite time we have and urges us to be deliberate about the life we want to live. Being human also means we think, have beliefs and emotions, make choices, and grow. We are far from perfect. It makes us the same (humans) but different (individuals). We can acknowledge the past, live in the present, and build the future. We are responsible for our lives and yet vulnerable to immense uncertainty.

Medicine and helping people gives us pride, purpose, and fulfillment. We happily justify committing our entire lives to it knowing there will be sacrifices in other areas of our lives. Medicine rewards hard work and excellence, rebukes mistakes and complacency, and humbles knowledge and overconfidence. We put high expectations on ourselves, and others put high expectations on us. Our decisions have consequences on people's lives. Medicine grooms us to embrace the grind and never settle. It is a requirement to succeed. Once we become accustomed to it, it is hard to dial it

back. Part of being human is the ability to pursue, but also the necessity to rest and experience other aspects of life. If we don't, we will burn out or let our lives pass, not realizing what we've missed.

When I think about being human in medicine, I try to take a step back and regularly reflect on what I want from my life, what is in my control, what is most important, and how to prioritize and take appropriate action. I want to live a long, healthy, happy, productive, purposeful, and fulfilled life and leave the world a better place than when I found it. It is simple but resonates with me and gives me direction. I also need to be cognizant of what is within my control because many things are not. Focusing on what I can control allows me to stress less about the things that I cannot, live happier, and feel more in control. Letting go and accepting what I cannot control allows me to focus on less, which allows me to put more effort into what is most important. I have three main important categories in my life: my family, health, and career, in that order. Looking back from my deathbed gives me this perspective. Above all, I want to be a good partner and father – being present, available, and sharing the family experience. Secondly, I want to take care of my health. Finally, my career as a future physician.

Understanding this hierarchy is important because without it, we can get lost. There have been many times I have put academics ahead of family and health. Straying from one's values is easy to do because of the passion and demand for medicine. I can put 100 hours into it every week and still have endless things to learn. Medical school is demanding and requires hard work, but I don't think the excessive overwhelming stress is worth your family or health. Thankfully, I have a family, body, and systems in place that center me when my priorities are out of alignment. With all this in mind, the final piece is figuring out how to structure my life to align with my goals and navigating everything life throws at me.

Figuring out what works as an individual is essential. Scheduling, measuring, and compartmentalization work for me. I treat my academics like an extended workweek allocating Monday to Saturday 9 am to 6 pm, mostly at MUN. Studying at home is not as efficient and makes it

harder to create mental space. When a due date is close, I may go over time, but I am conscious of getting it back when things slow down. I log my weekly hours to create this accountability. This routine allows me to compartmentalize time for family, health, or other things. By putting in more hours I would perform better, but using my values as a guide makes decisions easier. I am not willing to sacrifice my family or health to an extreme degree. Most of my time outside academics is for my family. I try to be fully present, which usually includes putting my phone or laptop away and trying to participate in shared activities. I put a lot of time into my mental and physical health because it impacts everything else. Health truly is wealth. I categorize five main factors of health that come from Ben Bergeron's podcast, *Chasing Excellence*, plus one that I added, Planet. They are mindset, exercise, nutrition, recovery, and connection.

I think of Mindset as how we think. It determines why we live the way we do. It is like Gandhi said, "Your beliefs become your thoughts, your thoughts become your words, your words become your actions, your actions become your habits, your habits become your values, your values become your destiny". If we can influence our minds to think happy, growth-minded, and morally good, we give ourselves a better chance to live a good life. It is a trainable skill. I consciously train it by trying to be self-aware and learning, every day. It usually manifests as reading 30 minutes of something non-fiction each day that improves me as a human being. In terms of fitness, I aim for 60 minutes of moderate to high-intensity physical activity six times per week. I created a non-negotiable for myself as I struggled to exercise when balancing school and family. One missed day becomes a recovery day, and extra effort goes into the next day. If I miss a second day, it becomes non-negotiable the third. I also purchased a treadmill and home gym to increase accessibility and reduce travel time. I watch lectures while on the treadmill allowing me to combine study and exercise without having to cut into family time.

For nutrition, I keep it simple. Maintaining a healthy diet is difficult in medical school and with a young family, but strategies exist. I follow the 'eat real food, not too much, mostly plants' philosophy of Michael Pollan. I try and buy healthy food, meal prep, and use a meal delivery service a couple of times a week. I think of recovery as our mental and physical battery that we use daily for everything and need to recharge. I consider sleep the most important recharger, aiming for eight hours per night (56 per week). With babies who wake up nightly, I take naps when possible.

Connection simply refers to the strong meaningful connections we have in our lives. It can be to family, friends, pets, career, purpose, community, or others and is what makes life worth living. Quality matters more than quantity. I try and connect with my career and peers at school, my family at home, and my friends at least once a week. I often combine fitness and connection by playing team sports or working out in groups.

The final factor is the planet. Human connection to nature is a core component of being human, even in our increasingly modernized world. It is no secret the role nature has in supporting or destroying life. While far from perfect, I make the effort to try and educate myself and take action to reduce, reuse, and recycle to help our planet because it impacts me, my family, my community, the world, and the future.

The six factors act like a compass to help navigate my daily life in the direction I want to go while accepting the uncontrollable events that occur, and the strengths and weaknesses of being human in medicine.

I would summarize being human in medicine into a few simple concepts. We need to accept the human condition and acknowledge the strengths and weaknesses that come with it. We need to take accountability for doing the best we can to live based on what is important to us, understanding that moving in the right direction is more important than perfection. Within medicine, we need to remember that our time and energy are limited, and we need to take care of ourselves, to take care of others, and live long, healthy, happy lives.

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