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The Reality of being a Healer in the Modern United States Healthcare System

Some people believe that the process of becoming a healer resides somewhere in your DNA. That may be in part true. However, the majority of healers find healing as their calling after encountering transformational events during their life. Once a person decides to commit to the rigorous training involved in becoming a healer, they begin a decade and a half long pursuit of knowledge needed in order to be worthy of wearing the white coat. The particular type of doctor journey that I will be describing in this story will be that of a biomedical doctor here in the United States. I chose to interview a medicine specialist currently practicing in greater Los Angeles area whom I built a relationship with while he was doing work in the greater Philadelphia area. Prior to building a close relationship with Mike, I had full intentions of studying to become a Sports Medicine Orthopedic Surgeon. As I spent more time with Mike I learned more about the process of being a practicing doctor in today's medical system which forced me to reconsider my career aspirations.

Doctor Mike grew up in a small town in the American Midwest. For anyone who has not been to the Midwest, the summers are short and the winters are long. Mike did not at all have the typical childhood that I would expect of a physician. Mike grew up as part of a working class American family, living most of his childhood as an overweight kid. By the time Mike approached the age of seventeen, he was a bit misguided, and actually ended up leaving high school. It was at this time, by accident, Mike slowly began to stumble into what he wanted to do.

While in need of employment, Mike was able to land a job as a Sales Associate at a local health food store. While in training for his new position, Mike was taught an enormous amount of information about healthier foods for the body, and what they did to the body. As an overweight teenager, Mike immediately began to apply his new knowledge to his own life and saw dramatic results. Through this process, the process of changing eating habits and creating an overall healthier life became Mike's passions. Doctor Mike soon started to take courses on exercise, and before long, he was a certified personal trainer with a tremendous amount of knowledge of nutrition. However, Mike did not see himself wearing sweatpants to work for the next forty years. While working part time as a personal trainer, Mike enrolled full time as a Biology major at his local university in order to fulfill his curiosity of how the body works. While enrolled in his Biology curriculum and working as a personal trainer, Mike frequently saw people with whom he had grown up not taking care of themselves and were now suffering from the consequences. Fortunately for Mike, he was able to realize the benefits of the changes he had made to his life which inspired him to help his struggling acquaintances. As Mike continued to work with several of his elementary school classmates, he began to see results he soon became addicted to helping people become healthier. This success inspired Mike to devote himself to obtaining a level of knowledge so that he would be able to help people tackle more severe health problems such as cancer, and that meant Mike was going to be going to Medical School.

After receiving a Bachelor's degree in Biology with a minor in Chemistry from the University of Wisconsin, Mike began applying to Medical Schools. This was the point at which Mike encountered his first adversity. He applied to nine medical schools and did not get into any. This is not uncommon among applicants; however, this caught Mike by surprise. With his 3.7 GPA and scoring in the seventy-fifth percentile on the Medical School Admissions Test, he did

not think he would have trouble getting into at least one medical school. Weeks later, the final school that Mike had applied to, Midwestern University School of Osteopathic Medicine sent him a letter. The letter was small and thin, so prior to opening it, Mike “knew” what information lay in that envelope. Luckily, he was wrong. The letter stated that he was not a strong enough applicant at this time. However, they offered him admission into their Masters of Biomedical Science program, which would be a great gateway into their medical school two years in the future. Mike went on to obtain a Masters degree in Biomedical Science from Midwestern University located in Chicago, Illinois. Following the completion of his program, he was accepted into their School of Osteopathic Medicine. It was at this moment that Mike realized had he not gotten that Sales Associate job at that health food store, he had no idea how his life would have turned out. Because of his ambitions, he was able to leave his home town and see that world. Many people that Mike attended high school with have not been afforded that same luxury. He realized that could have easily been him. But now, he was going to be a doctor, the most prestigious occupation that we have in this country with the chance to make with world a better place, or so he thought.

Today, Mike is a practicing internal medicine specialist in the greater Los Angeles area. Needless to say, he has come a long way from an overweight kid from Wisconsin that dropped out of high school. He specializes primarily in the management of man-made disease, such as high blood pressure which ails a lot of the underserved communities across greater Los Angeles. Mike described his healing philosophy as simply “...trying to be the best proponent for yourself while achieving an overall balanced life”. He views the body as somewhat of a mixture between energy channels and anatomical structure stating “...it is a mix between both physical and mental capabilities which push us in each direction”. Mike states the “American lifestyle” is the biggest

reason why he has a job. This is the major causative factor of disease in our society, in terms of what he deals with on a daily basis. Each day, he uses “the five standards of evidence-based medicines” along with standards of care in order to monitor his patients’ disease. At the beginning of this journey to becoming a healer, Mike thought he would be able to make great change and a positive influence on this world. Now that he is living his goal, he realizes that he cannot change this flawed system. In fact, Mike feels that the system has changed him. The system has forced him not to look at patients as a way to help this world, but as numbers or experiments. Overall, the last few years Mike has never received any negative feedback. However, what hurts him the most is that he has seldomly received positive feedback, which is ironically the entire reason he decided to become a healer. The main reason for this level of mediocrity is due to the fact that Mike feels he is just a cog in the wheel of a flawed system that is managed by people outside of the system. While practicing internal medicine at a small clinic outside of Los Angeles designed to serve underserved communities, unfortunately, Mike cannot be heard by those who do manage the system, though he has tried.

When Mike embarked on the journey to becoming a medical doctor, he envisioned himself measuring success by the number of patients he was able to help live better lives. The reality is Mike is a slave to a variety of guidelines, and he lives life day-to-day while trying not to get sued and lose his job. Adding to these challenges is the fact that he has five hundred thousand dollars in student loan debt.

One night, while Mike was on call, his phone rang. On the other line was a patient of his. She had a mass in her liver before being discharged from the clinic. When she began to feel pain is when she called Mike. Mike then made the necessary calls to get her scheduled to see a GI specialist. It turns out this patient now has liver cancer and is back in the hospital. It took two

weeks for the GI doctor to be able to see the patient because of the regulations within the system. This particular patient has now seen several doctors, had numerous tests done, and nothing has been done to help her, while her cancer is being untreated, mainly because of regulatory factors set forth by people who do not have to abide by them. This is the reality of what Mike has to deal with every day. Mike wants to live his dream of helping every patient that he can in a quick and efficient manner; however, he struggles mightily to provide the care that he desires because of the dysfunctionality of the systems that he is in and the regulations that he must meet.

With the regulations that Mike is put under on a day to day basis, he simply is not able to accomplish what he thought he would be able to as a medical doctor. Mike believed that he would be able to make changes to a flawed system, however, if he had tried to do that, he would no longer be a practicing medical doctor. Thus, the system changed him and handcuffed him with hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of student loan debt. At his small practice outside of Los Angeles, Mike does get to help underserved communities, when the system allows. However, that systems do not allow him to work at the rate and the efficiency that he would be able to if he were to make the changes he had envisioned. He believes that he is not being able to provide adequate patient care. Being unable to make a big difference working at a very small clinic has made Mike aware that he must eventually move to a bigger hospital in order to potentially have his voice be heard. Although the system has forced him to change the way he practices medicine, he has still not forgotten why he wanted to become a doctor and is currently working towards getting a position of enough power where he can see his vision through.¹

¹ The five standards of evidence-based care are: 1.) Convert information needs into answerable questions. 2.) Track down with maximum efficiency the best with which to answer

them. 3.) Critically appraise that evidence for its validity and usefulness. 4.) Apply the results of this appraisal in your practice. 5.) Evaluate your performance.

<http://med.fsu.edu/index.cfm?page=medicalinformatics.ebmTutorial>

