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## Teaching and Learning Moments

### The Death and Birth of a Physician



I have always found it a weird concept to grasp that there is someone who has watched me grow up in incremental steps, milestone by milestone, year by year. That person was my pediatrician. In half-hour checkups once a year, he got a quick snapshot of my life. When I was born, he gave my brother and me (surprise twins!) our first checkup. When I was a toddler, he answered all of my mom's phone calls about weird rashes, fevers, and sore throats. When I was in middle school, I remember sitting in the waiting room before a shot, staring at a picture of him with a little girl squeezing his nose, a stethoscope around his neck, and a big grin on his face.

As the years continued to fly by, I entered college as a premed student. When I was a junior undergraduate, decisions about my future started to be made. When I went home after the semester ended, I had finished all but one of my premed courses and had begun preparing for the MCAT exam. In my eyes, this meant that I could officially consider myself a fetus physician, not quite born but developing nicely. And I could see my future—I could see myself in medical school. My dad, a physician himself, saw it too. One day, he let me try on his white coat, threaded with his name . . . my name. Fittingly, my dad is much taller than me and the coat skimmed the floor, so it almost appeared that I was playing

dress-up, which I sort of was. Even so, everything felt right.

I was sitting at our dining room table one day, the MCAT review book sprawled open next to me, when I heard the news—my pediatrician, after a battle with pancreatic cancer, had died. I shut the book. To me, my pediatrician's death was tragic not only as the loss of a role model but also as a loss of innocence. Doctors and the medicine they practiced were not invincible. This realization hit me hard. I began to doubt that the field was right for me. Maybe I couldn't handle the feeling that no matter how hard I might try, the things I had been studying—biology, chemistry, the body—could work so hard against me.

As the break ended and I went back to school and continued with my classes, my pediatrician was still in the back of my mind. About a week into the semester, I learned of a seminar that brought students together with people from the local community to discuss cancer. In honor of my doctor, I decided to sign up and go.

One of our first assignments was to interview a community member, and although we only talked for around 20 minutes, I learned a lot about her—her diagnosis, her fear of no longer being able to drive but ultimate joy driving again after months of treatment—and as upstate New Yorkers, we of course chatted about the weather.

After the seminar ended, the woman turned to me. “You are going to make a fine physician one day,” she said as we walked out of the room. The more I thought about it, the more I wondered why. What did she see in me?

I kept thinking about what she had said as the seminar sessions continued. Each week, I learned about medicine not from the perspective of biology and chemistry but from stories of perseverance and humanity. I listened as two women recounted how they became friends at a support group, I saw how one man kept coming to the meetings even after his wife had died from her own battle with cancer, and I appreciated the simple moments when the community members were so willing to talk and laugh with us before the sessions started.

Finally, I think I understand. Maybe the beauty of medicine and being a physician isn't being able to solve every problem and prevent every tragic outcome (no matter how badly and desperately we want to) but being there and supporting the people who need us, every step of the way. And in this moment, I feel reborn.

#### Marin Langlieb

**M. Langlieb** is a student, College of Arts and Sciences, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York; email: mel276@cornell.edu; Twitter: @mlanglieb.

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