

dear residents

How Our Work Shapes Our Reality

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Dear Residents,

When I meet people for the first time, they either ask "what do you do?" or sometimes they ask, "where are you from?" The latter is the easier question, but sometimes people are curious about that too, and it can lead to a conversation about where I am *really* from and how I got here. But more often they get more curious about what I do. Usually the conversation is short - but sometimes, people really get curious about whether I enjoy my job and how it has changed me or changed my outlook on life.

As you think about your work - I expect there are the objective descriptors of your work: you will spend 1-5 years in residency training, rotating through three or more health care systems, experiencing a variety of inpatient and outpatient clinical scenarios. You will assess, plan, and follow through on these care plans. Along the way you will make new friends, acquire new skills and new knowledge. This is the objective reality of your work.

And then there is the subjective reality of your work: things that bring you joy, excitement, or sometimes grief or pain. You experience joy when you really get to help someone and relieve their suffering, or when you develop a new skill. Conversely you can be saddened by the loss of someone or something they valued, or a personal outcome that didn't go your way. You feel exhausted at times or question your choices or get mad at someone.

The objective and subjective realities of your work are not always neatly demarcated. In all probability they merge into an intersubjective reality: these are the stories we tell ourselves about what it means to be a resident or an attending, a program coordinator or a program director.

The overarching story might be the "love-hate" dichotomy - you may tell someone that you love your work or that you really hate it or you may parse out what you love and what you hate about it. Digging deeper you may think through various aspects of your work along different pairs of intersubjective realities.

What's the sympathetic/parasympathetic balance of your work? Do you have to act quickly or do you have time to be more thoughtful and deliberative. Even though true emergencies are memorable, I expect that most of what we do gives us the time and space to assess the clinical scenario with thoughtful deliberation - we construct a differential diagnosis rather than administer epinephrine, secure an airway or apply the paddles. Workload can change the balance - a few thoughtful and spaced-out assessments can quickly morph into a frenetic handling of multiple admissions.

How does your job shape the level of trust you experience in others? Are your patients and colleagues "out to get you" or is that really a vestige of the "House of God" era? The rise of Narrative Medicine has

humanized patients through their stories and teamwork in medicine has largely eliminated the sense of victimization interns traditionally felt and subsequently perpetuated when they advanced to more senior roles.

What is the balance between autonomy and subordination? Do your decisions and opinions count or are they ignored or overruled. Is how you approach your work the result of consensus or authority? Are you suspicious about the "real agenda" or does the culture engender a sense of trust and a shared mission? These are for you to decide. Everyone views their work from their own lens of experience.

How forgiving of error is your work? Perhaps not so much if you are an interventional cardiologist, but likely more forgiving if you are a rheumatologist. Does what you do require exceptional technical skills (most procedural specialties) or more soft skills (which are actually pretty hard). Perhaps your work involves a bit of both.

I view my work as messy but enjoyable. It's messy because the learning environment is constantly evolving and is subject to myriad internal and external forces. It's messy because most change requires negotiation, recalibration and the establishment of a new consensus. My work is enjoyable because science never fails to surprise, driven by the continuous creation of new knowledge. My work is enjoyable because, through you, I get to be part of the future. Watching you grow, succeed and prosper feels like a gift - a messy but wonderful garden that grows, buds and bears fruit. My work has changed me. I am more patient than I used to be, I'm a better listener now and I embrace being wrong and see it as the path to being less wrong the next time around.

Residency is messy business, but also an enjoyable time, filled with immense growth and the opportunity to realize your hidden potential. From nervous intern in July to competent resident in June, these years will be memorable. This is your story, your intersubjective reality. You will share it with others for years to come - "when I was a resident..."

Best wishes for a wonderful May,

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