

dear residents

Life is a Series of Handoffs

November 16, 2025

Dear Residents,

At home, handoffs can be just as perilous as they are in medicine. Before either of us travels, my spouse and I exchange a detailed checklist worthy of an ICU sign-out: who's picking up the dry cleaning, who's watering the plants, when Amazon packages are expected, whether the cat's litter box has been changed, and the perennial reminder that "the dishwasher doesn't load itself." Despite our best efforts, something is always missed. There's a reason the Joint Commission never tried accrediting family handoffs.



But much of life, if we think about it, is a series of handoffs. We leave instructions not only for when we're away for a few days but for when we will no longer be here at all. We do this with wills, letters, and memories. Every transfer of responsibility, large or small, carries the same quiet hope: that someone else will care as much as we did and will know what to do next.

Medicine has long resisted that idea. We were raised in a culture that equates responsibility with possession: *my* patient, *my* plan, *my* outcome. The intention is noble, but the result can be corrosive. If we are ever to restore work-life balance and make a dent in the epidemic of burnout, we must learn to hand off not only our tasks but also our trust. We must relinquish the belief that only we know what's happening with our patients or what needs to be done.

Atul Gawande in the [Checklist Manifesto](#) described what he called "*the handoff paradox*." The more medicine depends on teamwork and continuity, the more each handoff becomes both a point of vulnerability and a test of professionalism. A good handoff, he wrote, "requires not just transfer of information but transfer of responsibility and of belief." It is a moment when one clinician's vigilance becomes another's. It's the moment when we accept that continuity is not the same as constancy, and that care can be seamless even as caregivers change.

To achieve that, two commitments matter:

1. **Be willing to let others help.** Accepting help doesn't diminish your care; it sustains it. We are at our safest when we are part of a well-functioning system, not when we carry everything alone.
2. **Hand off well.** That means sharing the right information, clearly and courteously, anticipating what might matter overnight, and remembering that the covering physician is covering for many others too.

Handing off doesn't mean outsourcing your unfinished daytime work (with a few exceptions like actionable results that emerge later). It means being deliberate, thoughtful, and kind. It means recognizing that the quality of your sign-out is a reflection of respect for both your patient and your colleague.

In the end, handoffs are small acts of trust. They affirm that care is a collective endeavor and that rest, balance, and sustainability depend on our willingness to let others carry the baton for a while. In that way, each handoff, whether of a patient, a service, or a stage of life, becomes less a loss of control and more an act of stewardship.

Gawande in his book [Better](#), observed that, "*Better is possible. It does not take genius. It takes diligence. It takes moral clarity. It takes ingenuity. And above all, it takes a willingness to try.*"

So too with handoffs. Every handoff is a chance to try again, to trust again, and to build a system that endures beyond any one of us.

Warm regards,

Dino