

Monica Sullivan

The family physician has many roles in the field of medicine. Today they are the gate keepers of patient care. They are also the physicians who have guided me from the eager and uncertain college graduate to the confident and skilled medical student I am today. They were the first to teach me how to use my stethoscope and will be the last to transition me from medical student to practicing physician. Family physicians have molded generations of medical students and continue to uphold their oaths to be lifelong caregivers, caretakers, advisers, confidants, teachers and learners. They have helped me build the foundation upon which I continually place all that I learn. During my medical training I have experienced the wonder, rewards, sadness and bittersweet moments that encompass the substance of what is known as family medicine. I have learned how large the frame is for the knowledge I will continually gain over my lifetime of practice and how great the picture is when it includes the total care of patients and their families against every background and challenge. I have searched the fields of medicine to find the specialty in which my skills would fit, where I could genuinely make a difference and where my personality would feel at home. I have found that in the specialty of family medicine. I am anxiously awaiting the opportunity to experience all that my chosen specialty has in store for me.

I have found that the family physician's relationships with the patients and their families are unparalleled by any other specialty in the field of medicine. It is fascinating to observe the family physician's interaction with their patients and to observe the physician's role in family dynamics. The bond that exists between a patient, a patient's family and their family physician is invisible yet strong, and that unspoken trust is unbreakable. I have enjoyed listening to several family physicians describe how they have taken care of a certain patient throughout their infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, parenthood and advancing age. Observing those same physicians take care of multiple generations in a family is indescribable to me.

My ongoing experience with family physicians has altered my approach to patient care in addition to teaching me lifelong lessons that I will carry with me as I continue to transition from student to practicing physician. It is in that special moment when I walk into a patient's room and take their hand in mine and ask, "How are you today?" That will determine my interaction with this patient. Each patient has a different response. Some have answered happily in gratitude that their health remains intact and others in sadness over their debilitating or terminal illnesses. Some have responded in defeat when they discover that their treatment is not working and others in relief that their day is somehow better. Some have answered in joy when they announce the arrival of a new child or grandchild or another milestone event, and some respond in immense relief when the long awaited answer has been found. I find a special joy in every interaction and am consistently amazed by the amount individual patients teach me each and every day. Numerous patients have unselfishly invited me into their lives and their illnesses in the name of learning and I am humbled by their honesty and feel privileged for being permitted to take part in their care. Many family physicians have invited me into their practices with open arms, eager to teach and guide me in becoming a learned and skilled physician. I have been permanently touched by these gestures and will keep these early lessons close to my heart.

Family medicine is a continued commitment to all patients grown and small, healthy and ill, poor and wealthy. It is also the dedication to train future physicians, to teach the art and science of medicine, the humility in patient and family care, and the true difference between the words, "to cure" and "to heal". Family medicine is also that moment in a patient's room which is finally silenced and left in shambles from all of the equipment and the many specialists that have come and gone. It is that moment when the terminally ill patient looks toward me and asks in a tired, hoarse, yet pleading voice, "When is this all going to be over?". My heart will sink as the words

escape the patient's lips, and I answer honestly, "I do not know, but I will stay with you for now." And, I am able to stay. No other field of medicine seems to offer this same opportunity, and it is a responsibility that cannot and should not be taken lightly. I have learned that it is a joy, a privilege and a constant challenge to be a practicing family physician. I truly believe it to be my calling, my challenge to be a lifelong learner and my privilege to become that lifelong caregiver, caretaker, adviser, confidant, teacher and healer of patients and their families known as the family physician.