

Guest Editorial

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HOW TO SUCCEED IN MEDICINE

What are the secrets of success in medicine? One of them is making sure your CV is as strong as possible as early as possible, for example by getting an article published in this new journal. But there are lots of other ways, (1) that some successful doctors might not want you to know...

Listen, listen, listen

Right from the start of your clinical experience, let your patients tell you what is wrong with them, uninterrupted. Actively listen and you establish a more effective relationship. And don't avoid examining a patient properly. The art of high quality clinical medicine depends on high quality history taking and examination: without that, investigations are a waste of time.

Ask and act

Don't feel shy about admitting you don't know something. Look up things, even in front of patients, who appreciate you taking an interest. Put the patients' needs ahead of your own. Whatever your problems, put on your actor's mask, smile, carry on. All doctors at all levels sometimes feel nervous or unsure in clinical practice. Try to act confidently: it inspires confidence.

Rehearse!

Before giving a presentation, even if it's to a small group of other students, rehearse, rehearse, rehearse. Speak out loud in a room by yourself, time yourself, and be ruthless over cutting out stuff in order to keep to your allotted time. Then rehearse in front of a friend: ask them to check and criticise your slides. You will then wow your audience.

Be generous with your time

You are a professional. Take a professional attitude to time and your responsibilities, both in learning and in caring. If you will learn best from a patient at an awkward time for you, or if a patient needs your advice, try to oblige. You will be the ultimate gainer.

Speak face to face and be there!

Speak face to face. Personal regular meetings establish and oil daily professional relationships and later pay big dividends. As a student, go to all your timetabled events, contribute, ask questions, and get involved in student activities. You may feel that at the time no one notices whether or not you are there, but people take more note of this than you may imagine, and a keen and positive student is always appreciated. When you qualify, regularly attend local administration meetings, grand rounds, and national meetings. However out of place you might at first feel, you will gradually integrate and eventually become essential.

Lead change

Change is inevitable: lead it. Don't reject new ideas just because they seem mad. Opportunities arise all the time, often unexpectedly. Many aspects of medicine will radically change during your career, you can influence and be part of this.

Get a mentor

Someone more experienced can guide difficult decisions and give invaluable personal advice in your career. Friends and mentors are important.

Don't expect "them" to do it

"They ought to..." How often do you hear that? There is no "them". If you want to change something, you have to do it yourself! Lobby, join a committee, get elected so that you can make the changes that you can see are needed.

GETTING INVOLVED IN RESEARCH

Find something that excites you

Pick and develop a theme that you are genuinely interested in and feel ownership of. Follow your own star. You will quickly be considered an expert!

Be clinically relevant and question dogma

Choose clinically relevant research topics. Ask simple questions. Don't accept the status quo. Don't be overawed by your seniors – it's not long since they were students too.

Be original

Don't try to reinvent the wheel. Get aware of what others are doing in the area that interests you, with Google Scholar or PubMed literature searches.

Develop ideas – think outside the box

If you have an idea, work on it yourself. Don't expect others to do your work. If you think of a new angle to research or clinical practice, stick with it until you prove that it makes sense and get it established. Medicine constantly changes. Areas you can't understand are often ripe for a rethink. But not all your ideas will be good ones: learn to be self-critical and when to accept direction change. Expect research plans to sometimes go wrong: failure helps you learn.

It's easier to publish than you think

Plan your research to be publishable in as high ranking a journal as possible, but be realistic. The chances of getting into, say, the BMJ or Lancet are pretty small (even for me). So match your manuscript quality realistically to a journal. Get a "critical friend" to comment. Delete verbosity. Follow slavishly any suggestions from the editor. Don't be put off by an initial rejection, these are totally normal in the academic world, you just have to have the staying power to improve the manuscript and resubmit until you get an "Accept".

LATER IN YOUR CAREER (OR EVEN NOW)

Administration tips

Choose your battles, only fight the battles you are likely to win. Sacrifice unimportant issues to secure your main objective. Offer solutions, not just problems. Understand your administrators' pressures.

Crisis management

Sometimes you have to cancel everything and deal with a crisis, medical or personal. Most routine things can wait. Colleagues are nearly always understanding and supportive.

Every doctor gets complaints

It's one of the most horrible things, either as a student or as a doctor, to get a complaint from a patient. But sooner or later it will probably happen to you. So be prepared. Do all you can to avoid patient complaints. Try to neutralise them early. Drop everything to deal with them. Apologise early. Along with the doctor in charge, meet the patient, explain how it happened and how you will prevent it happening again. After a clinical mistake, take steps immediately to protect the patient. Remember your duty of candour.

Log it all

Keep a hard copy "logbook", that can't get lost or deleted, of your personal achievements. Update it regularly, in your own writing. You will find this incredibly helpful when you need to update your CV, and for lots of other purposes as well. E-formats change and eventually may become inaccessible but a hard copy notebook is super reliable.

Look after yourself

Develop friends and interests outside medicine. Give yourself "protected time". Keep fit. Although immensely rewarding, medical careers can be tough, so you must look after Number 1. By caring for yourself you will be better equipped to care for others.

The ideas in this article are mostly based on the Twenty Top Tips (1) that I aimed at trainee dermatologists, but they apply equally well to you! Don't worry, no one could follow them all perfectly, but some may be helpful. (2)

Medicine is a great career, with multiple possibilities to have an interesting and fulfilling life. There are always challenges, management structures are always changing, things have never been easy. Every generation of doctors faces different problems and tries to meet them. Read a little medical history and get things in perspective! Rise above today's problems and concentrate on the unique and extraordinary relationship that we are privileged to have with our patients.

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