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Pathways

Practical career advice for dermatology residents

Editor's Message

James Q. Del Rosso, D.O., F.A.O.C.D.

Dear Readers:

Welcome to this new issue of *PATHWAYS*. This issue focuses on how to enrich your practice and professional life through teaching, as well as tips on how to balance your busy work life with a fulfilling personal life.

First, is it possible to balance a successful practice and have time to have a fulfilling personal life? Dr. Richard Fried shares insights into finding balance between your professional and personal life. He offers practical tips for meeting the demands of patients while taking time for non-medical interests and for family and friends.

For the second article of this issue, Contributing Editor Michael S. Krivda interviewed Drs. Joseph Bikowski and James Spencer about how staying involved academically in the field of dermatology has made them better dermatologists. Both doctors stress the importance of sharing their knowledge — through teaching, writing or mentoring — with up-and-coming doctors. Also, read on for tips about the best ways to get involved and where to look for opportunities.

Please e-mail any comments or suggestions you have for *PATHWAYS* to me through the following e-mail: stuleya@hmpcommunications.com.



Sincerely,
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Walking the Tightrope: Achieving Balance at Home and in the Office

Balancing the demands of a busy practice and the need for a satisfying life outside of medicine can be a physician's biggest challenge. One doctor shares tips on how to make it possible.

By Michael S. Krivda, Contributing Editor

Medicine is a profession that has long demanded much from its practitioners. Starting with the pressures of medical school to the rigors of residency and the demands of running a medical practice, physicians have always been pushed to the limit. However, it is these very challenges that attract hard-working individuals to the profession.



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• Improving Your Practice Through Academic Involvement

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A Trend in the Other Direction?

Some doctors are very good at working limited hours, pursuing a wide range of recreational interests and staying well connected to friends and family. Although other physicians may want to emulate them or even be reincarnated as them, critics complain that they do not devote sufficient time to their medical practices, claiming that they don't seem to know when it's time to put down the skateboard and pick up the stethoscope. Is this a sign of an uncommitted physician? And, will this eventually lead to greater difficulty for patients scheduling appointments?

"It's too early to call this a problem or even a trend, but I think it's something that warrants watching," says Richard Fried, M.D., Ph.D., Clinical Director of the Yardley Skin Enhancement and Wellness Center in suburban Philadelphia.



"Medicine is essentially a self-selecting profession that attracts hard-working, competitive high achievers," says Richard Fried, M.D., Ph.D., Clinical Director of the Yardley Skin Enhancement and Wellness Center in suburban Philadelphia. "Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons, **the conflicting demands of professional practice and personal life can quickly and insidiously become poorly balanced and overwhelming. It's too easy for us to put all of our time, focus and energy into the practice of medicine and to neglect the rest of our lives.** Medical practice and the demands of running a financially viable practice can become all consuming."

How can you tell if your life is out of balance and that you are spending too much time on your practice?

"If you are having trouble focusing or 'being in the moment' with patients, are spending an excessive amount of time daydreaming or you feel out of sync with your regular rhythm, then you have to ask yourself if it is time to slow down a bit and reassess your life," explains Dr. Fried. "Other things to look for are difficulties in decision-making, feeling depleted and never energized. These are the classic physiological signs of

burnout, which is really what we are talking about."

RECOGNIZE WHEN YOU HAVE A PROBLEM

Objectively, it should be obvious when work has come to consume an unhealthy amount of your time, energy and *joie de vivre*. However, as is the case with many other aspects of life, passion, obligation and fear can lead to obsessive involvement. All these lead to increased levels of anxiety when not working and a plethora of "rationaliza-

It's too easy for us to put all of our time, focus and energy into the practice of medicine and to neglect the rest of our lives.

tions" why it is necessary to become ever more lost in the pursuit of professional and financial success.

"Surprisingly, many doctors are afraid of losing their prestige, perceived competence, their edge and even their jobs. This can be true even for experienced physicians with many years of excellent service," says

Dr. Fried. "These physicians see younger doctors as more energetic competition for their patients. They have convinced themselves that if they delay seeing patients to take time off, then those patients will go elsewhere for care."

In truth, most patients are reluctant to leave a medical practice once they have grown comfortable with a particular physician. **An experienced and knowledgeable dermatologist who is running a well-managed practice and who sees his or her patients in a reasonable amount of time has little reason to worry about losing those patients.**

"If you're still at the office every evening seeing patients, regularly dread going to the office or the next exam room, and are drowning in insurmountable piles of charts and paperwork, these may be clear signs that you're probably out of balance and that the rest of your life is suffering. This imbalance may not be necessary, nor is it healthy for you or your practice."

Another problem that Dr. Fried sees is what he refers to as the "stupidity fear factor". "We physicians spend too much of our time attending conferences, being involved in medical societies or doing aca-



Signs of an Unbalanced Life

10 key signs that it is time to slow down and find balance:

1. Physical or Emotional exhaustion or depression
2. Significant marital and family conflict
3. Sexual dysfunction
4. Insomnia or sleeping more than usual
5. Increase in physical problems such as headaches, frequent colds, or gastrointestinal problems
6. Boredom or lack of concentration
7. Increased worry
8. High alcohol or drug use
9. Cynicism/negativism/apathy
10. Inability to make decisions.

ademic work or research. **You have to learn when it is time to say enough is enough, and that is a hard thing for a lot of physicians to do,** he explains. "It's a pattern of behavior that feeds on itself. You work hard so you have little time to develop outside interests. Therefore, sadly, some physicians have little else to do but work since there is no compelling 'other passions' seducing you to leave the workplace."

The demands of family life can be both a source of great pleasure as well as a source of substantial stress. Physicians who become totally depleted in the office can be left with "nothing else to give" upon returning home. As a result, some find themselves spending less time at home trying to recoup their energy. Family members can become resentful and hostile, leading to further withdrawal.

"I have never heard elderly patients lament that they should

have spent more time at the office, but I certainly have heard many who were sorry for missing their kids grow up," says Dr. Fried.

Dr. Fried offers the view that it is critically important for physicians to have involvement and ideally the support of a loving and caring family.

"Family obligations can be difficult, but being there and involved will pay off in the end. The reality is that spouses and children are not as adoring and complimentary as patients.

"Be careful of the seductive allure of pseudo-intimacy of patient and staff relationships; they cannot replace true friends and family."

STEPS TO CORRECT OR AVOID THE PROBLEM

Dr. Fried says that the critical first step is to evaluate your workload and workstyle to determine if changes need to be made. Perhaps you need to change your hours, your patient load per day or hour, or the number of committees on which you serve.

"It's sometimes a matter of learning to say no and identifying what pace and level of commitment works best for your personality and the needs of your family," he says.

Dr. Fried believes that a fundamental problem is that physicians are a driven and competitive bunch, indoctrinated by education and training to always go the extra mile.

"We are recognized and rewarded when we push ourselves to the extreme," he says.

"The GPA, MCAT, honor society, all-night study marathons, on-call nights, board exams, all emphasize our worth and success by extreme involvement. Then, finally, the marathon training culminates in clinical practice.

"What are the measures of success? Remuneration, number of patients seen, number of prescriptions written?"

"When can the external pressures and ongoing performance evaluations begin to abate? In

Some Helpful Resources

Organizations:

- The Center for Professional Well-Being (www.cpwb.org)
- The International Medical Spouse Network (www.medicalspouse.org)
- The Institute of HeartMath (www.heartmath.org)
- Job Stress Network (www.workhealth.org)

Books:

- *Margin* by Richard Swenson, M.D. (Navpress, 1992)
- *Strategic Career Management for the 21st Century Physician* by Gigi Hirsch, M.D. (American Medical Association Press, January 2000)
- *Leaving the Bedside: The Search for a Nonclinical Medical Career*. By Maija Balagot (Editor), Mark Ingebretsen (Editor), and Suzanne Fraker (Editor) (American Medical Association; Revised edition July, 1996)



reality, never! Evidence-based medicine, audits, insurance company patient satisfaction ratings and coding fears all continue to feed and rekindle the fear and drive.

So, how can a physician undergo a cognitive shift that allows for a normal, balanced life?

"Simple, we must force ourselves to repeat a survival mantra: life is short and failure to achieve balance with family, friends, hobbies and spirituality almost inevitably lead to unhappy endings," says Dr. Fried.

"And the important part is to say no without feeling guilty about it. Saying no may be the most difficult thing that some of these physicians do." He goes on to say that ***you must set these boundaries for your professional life, and then take the steps necessary to ensure that there is more to your life than medicine.***

Dr. Fried says that it is important to develop interests outside of the practice of medicine and ideally not connected to your medical life at all.

"Having a hobby or an interest that makes you look forward to leaving work and that really takes

your mind off your work is the best way to reinvigorate and reenergize," he explains. "Regardless of what you do, ***embracing interests and hobbies allows you to experience life more fully and to develop yourself as a person.*** Personal development and a broader perspective of human struggles and existence lead to inner fulfillment,

Regardless of what you do, embracing interests and hobbies allow you to experience life more fully and to develop yourself as a person.

improved personal relationships, and greater satisfaction at work. There are many, many things to explore: tennis, yoga, music, gardening, reading, fishing, biking, collecting, college courses, and so on. Quoting that famous philosopher Nike: Just do it!"

Since a new interest may spring from an unexpected source, Dr. Fried says that you

should not be afraid to just try several new interests. Start by taking classes at a local community college, perhaps in computers, photography or martial arts. You may even try joining a local biking or gardening club. If you can get friends or family members involved, all the better. Though it may sound like just more work, regular exercise is an important de-stressor.

Cautioning that this is not the time to go it alone, Dr. Fried encourages all physicians to develop and rely on a network of colleagues and friends both in and outside of medicine whom you can rely on for support.

"You need to find people who you can count on to have your best interests at heart and who will help by listening and offering good advice," he says.

"Nothing is more stressful than being isolated, and it's easy to feel isolated when you're holed up in your office for hour after endless hour. Get out and talk to friends, colleagues, your spouse and your family members. Just doing that can really relieve a lot of stress and can help you see things clearer." ■

Improving Your Practice Through Academic Involvement

Teaching can be very satisfying and enriching, but it can also make you a much better doctor.

By Michael S. Krivda, Contributing Editor

Joseph Bikowski, M.D., is a passionate man. He is passionate about his chosen profession and he is passionate about his responsibilities to his patients. His passion drives him to continue to exclusively practice medical dermatology in an era when so many of his friends and colleagues have scaled back their medical dermatologic practices in pursuit of far more lucrative cosmetic procedures.

"My reasons are simple: I feel that we really do have a moral obligation to continue to provide medical care to all of our patients," says Dr. Bikowski, a dermatologist in private practice in Pittsburgh. "It's too easy to lose sight of the things that are important to us as doctors because today we have to focus more on money and on the business of running a practice and less on the practice of medicine."



Dr. Bikowski is equally passionate about his role as a teacher. Despite his busy schedule, he regularly drives almost 3 hours from his home near Pittsburgh to the campus of Ohio State University to teach a clinical class at Ohio State's School of Medicine.

"I hear too many doctors say that they don't have the time to teach," laments Dr. Bikowski. "But for me, it's not a question of making time to teach. ***I think that teaching is so important that you schedule the teaching first and then make time for everything else.***"

James Spencer, M.D., a dermatologist in private practice in St. Petersburg, FL, shares Dr. Bikowski's passion.

"Any physician, whether a general practitioner or a dermatologist or a surgeon, has to do something beyond his or her clinical practice to keep things fresh. Some do research or conduct clinical trials. The other thing that a physician can do is to teach," he explains.

Dr. Spencer's views on teaching run deep and spring from his academic roots.

"I started in academics and now I am in private practice, but I loved teaching so much that I have a faculty position at Mount Sinai Medical School in New York," he says. "We are the luckiest people in the world; we are doing what we want to do at our own pace, and we make a pretty good living doing it. ***Not only do we owe it to the profession to give back, but teaching can also be one of the most emotionally satisfying things that you do.*** It adds balance and meaning to your life well beyond the effort that you put into it."

THE BENEFITS FOR YOU

According to Dr. Spencer, teaching has many benefits. It keeps you current, it keeps you honest, and it keeps you from

Finding Teaching Opportunities

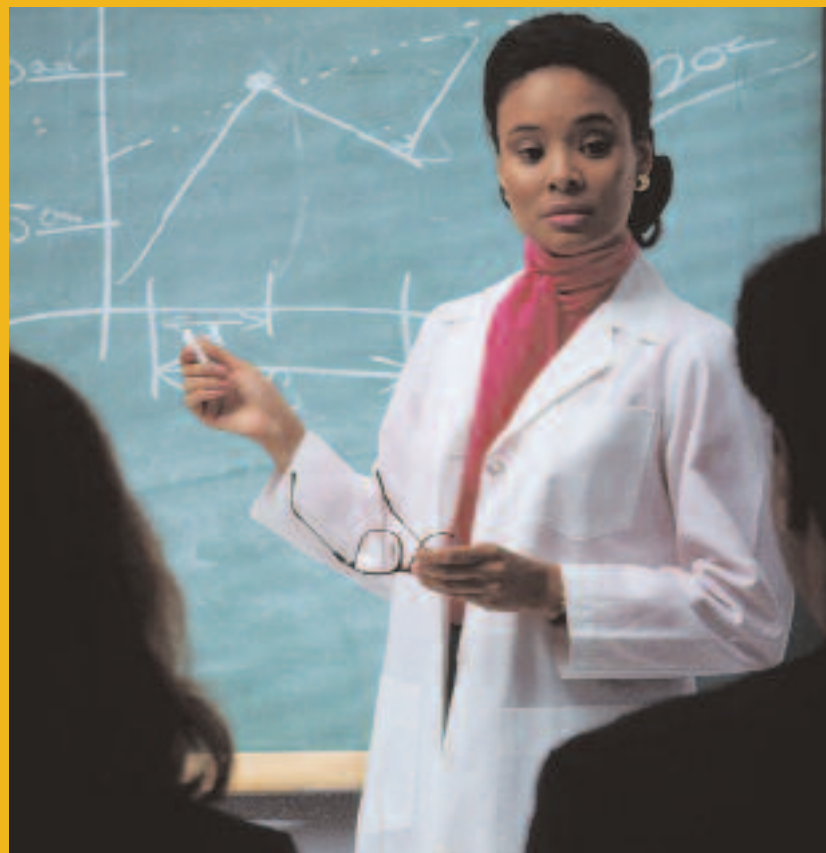
According to Dr. Bikowski, most medical schools have some type of program that allows physicians to teach clinical classes or to work with residents.

"If you want to teach in an academic environment, meaning a university-based medical school, your best approach is to contact the chairperson of the dermatology department," he says. "However, each school is different and they all make their own determination as to their need for outside instructors, who they use and at what level they will use them."

Dr. Bikowski explains, however, that there are many other teaching opportunities outside of the academic world. "For more than 20 years, I have been teaching a course that is designed for dermatology residents who are preparing for medical board testing."

Dr. Spencer also suggests that you contact the American Academy of Dermatology and talk to them about a course that you might have in mind to develop. "They are very receptive to physicians who want to do that and who have a pretty good idea about what they want to do," he says. "Teaching comes in many forms, you can do clinical trials and research and present your results, you can write, you can lecture. All these are forms of teaching because you ultimately share your gained knowledge, and you gain the same benefits of having diversity and being re-energized."

"Another area of teaching is mentoring other doctors. I routinely have other physicians come to my office and spend time with me while I see patients," says Dr. Spencer. "I get these contacts mostly from the lectures that I do and I am also involved in the American Society of Dermatologic Surgery Preceptorship Program and get visitors that way. But I do get "cold calls" from other physicians who may have heard that I do this, and I try to accommodate as many as I can. Not only does it help me be a better clinician because I have to really keep on my toes with other doctors around, but it invigorates the days and I really look forward to having those doctors around."



becoming mentally lazy. You have to be sharp if you are dealing with young and hungry doctors.

"Teaching is a labor of love since there is generally little or no pay involved, especially at a medical college. In fact, medical schools are struggling to keep their heads above water since the cost of educating doctors is skyrocketing. Many doctors who had opted for an academic life are suddenly finding themselves seeing patients more and teaching

less in order to make a living."

Dr. Bikowski also feels strongly that ***a physician who teaches will get more than he or she gives***

"It's really a multi-level benefit to the teaching physician," he explains. "On one level you benefit because you have to be prepared to conduct your class, so you are forced to keep up with the latest developments and thinking. On another level, the students are doing their own research and are constantly pre-

senting you with new and stimulating challenges to your skills and knowledge."

A COMMITMENT TO TEACHING

Why are these accomplished physicians so passionate about teaching? Dr. Bikowski has many, many reasons.

"First and foremost, as doctors, ***we have an obligation to share the knowledge and experience that we have gained through years of treating patients with the generations of doc-***



tors who follow us" he explains. "It's a real shame when someone has amassed a vast store of knowledge about how to quickly recognize certain conditions and how to best treat those conditions, but that person doesn't share that knowledge and insight with anyone. That knowledge, which may be unique, is lost when that person stops practicing medicine."

But Dr. Bikowski is quick to point out that you do not need a head full of rare and esoteric knowledge to be a valuable teacher.

"We all have something that we can share with others, whether it is a different approach to common treatments, a better way to deal with certain conditions, or insights into certain types of patients. We have all acquired knowledge, and we need to share that knowledge."

As part of his commitment to learning, Dr. Bikowski has amassed a vast library of photographic images of skin conditions — literally hundreds of thousands of photographs, carefully indexed and stored for easy reference.

"Taking the photographs is a form of teaching, and not simply because I will share the photos with other physicians, but also because it helps me really see the conditions I have photographed. Once I have taken a picture of a

condition, the image of that condition is locked in my head for a long time, and that helps me make faster and better diagnoses. I would encourage all dermatologists to routinely take photos of their patients."

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Dr. Bikowski stresses that the photos should be more than simple before-and-after shots and that you should spend time really capturing the look of a specific condition. You never know when you are going to see something unique in a photograph, even ones that you took, and you may miss something until you look at it.

A WAY TO ACHIEVE BALANCE

Both Dr. Spencer and Dr. Bikowski agree that teaching is an important way to energize yourself and your practice and an efficient way to keep yourself at the top of your medical game.

Dr. Bikowski says that there is an important intangible benefit to teaching: You are stimulated by your interaction with your students, and this can go a long way toward helping you retain your interest in the work you do.

"I find that the teaching helps to keep everything else fresh for me," says Dr. Bikowski. "Despite the long drive and the amount of effort, I always come back from teaching feeling reinvigorated and recharged."

Dr. Spencer echoes those sentiments. "The nice thing about being a dermatologist is that you have great flexibility in your schedule and you can easily fit an academic component into your week or month," he says. "You simply tell your front desk not to schedule patients on a particular afternoon and you are free to do your research or teach."

"Regardless of what you choose to do, research or teach, these things add a richness to your life and a meaning to your life beyond your medical practice." ■

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