

Opinion

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Are You an Unwitting Role Model?

W

e all remember fondly the crucible of our residencies and/or fellowships, during which we forged our professional identities under the guidance of one or more strong mentors. Most of us can identify a few of our teachers

who had a profound effect upon us.

There is plenty of evidence to show that a physician trainee's professional career choice is cemented by personal identification with a senior physician. For example, many land-grant medical schools share a mission that includes the provision of physicians for rural primary care practice in the state. They have established rotations in community private practices because they know that trainees will often return there (or to a similar area) to open their own offices.

Trainees identify as their strongest role models those physicians who 1) spend a considerable amount of time teaching, 2) have positive, respectful attitudes toward patients and their families, staff and colleagues, and 3) demonstrate honesty, politeness, enthusiasm, competence and knowledge. According to research, students especially value their mentors because from them the students learn the humanistic aspects of medicine: ethics, professional behavior, communication skills and empathy.

While most of the research on mentoring is concerned with formal learning environments in medical schools and residencies, informal

learning, mentoring and being mentored is a continuous process through our professional lives. If you are like me, you were struck by the suddenness with which your training was over and you were on your own. Flying solo. Facing steep learning curves in the financial arena. We never gave a moment's thought to modeling our behavior to other ophthalmologists in our community or being a role model ourselves, so self-absorbed were we in the exciting mysteries of starting practice. But had we thought for a while, we would have realized that our values were not suddenly rendered immutable on conclusion of training; indeed, they were still malleable—and influenced by our senior colleagues in practice.

Older we grew, I wager that most of us became unwitting role models. Until recently, I confess I was largely in that category myself. While we might have had an abstract notion of ourselves as role models, the fact that an often-anonymous junior professional might be intently watching our own behavior seemed foreign. The role model concept also ran counter to the spirit of rugged individualism that many physicians embrace—an almost studied rejection

of the worry about what the neighbors would think.

Are you among the ophthalmologists who aren't aware that they are role models? Like it or not, someone is emulating your behaviors. So you might as well spend a little time thinking about the effect you may be having on the next generation of professionals. Are your justifications for your professional behavior grounded in the patient's best interest, balanced by financial realities, rather than the other way around? Are you talking less and listening more, in the interests of better patient communication? Would you be proud to have a younger colleague at your side, observing, modeling, admiring? The future of our profession demands nothing less.



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