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Finding One's Tribe

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Family Medicine Moments

April 25, 2024

Introduction: As a follow-up to last week's piece from a mentee of mine about feeling valued during clerkship, I offer you another piece.

This time the reflection is very much about family medicine and the effect that our example in our department can have on learners. Alex Lo, UMass Chan '25, is also someone I am honoured to mentor in Blackstone House. He is a MassAHEC Urban Health Scholar and going into Family Medicine. He writes here about his time at Hahnemann Family Health Center and how his experience resonated with the same values he expressed when he applied to medical school. As a former member of the faculty at Hahnemann, it does not surprise me at all.

Finding One's Tribe

By Alex Lo

In the slog of MS3, [juxtaposed to] the times where I felt like a nuisance, like I was just delaying my attending or resident in their care for the patient, I can recall numerous times when I felt valued by patients and care teams. One of my earliest experiences as an MS3 was when I was pre-rounding on surgery and the patient was a former internal medicine physician. After a fun conversation, he put his arm on my shoulder and said "Alex, please don't lose your humanity as you become a doctor." I am grateful that I met

this patient so early in my third year because during the times that I did not feel valued, my mind would return to this patient. Their kind words of guidance enabled me to shift and tailor my perspective on third year, being sure to find moments of gratitude and humanity in the inhumane chaos that our healthcare system is.

With this in mind, I felt most valued by team members and patients during my family medicine rotation at Hahnemann. I believe my experience on this rotation can be summarized by a particular patient encounter. A mid-20s, Spanish-speaking, new patient presented to our primary care clinic looking for a SSRI refill that was last prescribed to him in Venezuela. When I asked about the last time he received his medication, he sheepishly smiled and looked away. He said that he came to Worcester two months prior but didn't catch his return flight and had since run out of his SSRI. He stayed to "pursue [his] American Dream." I was taken aback by such an intimate disclosure. I asked him how he was adjusting to life here, if he had access to local resources for immigrants seeking citizenship, and about his history of anxiety before reviewing standard health maintenance questions. When I brought my resident preceptor into the room, who informed the patient that she was going to be his doctor, he eagerly asked, "can Alex be my doctor too?"

I didn't do anything medically outstanding for this patient. Yet, I got the sense that this patient felt like he was being treated with respect. He understood that I was supporting him regardless of his immigration status. The primary care team at Hahnemann was now his healthcare team, they were on his side in an immigration climate that has recently been "us vs. them." I may not have fully understood this patient's exact struggles, but as someone whose parents are from an underserved immigrant community, I had an idea of them. Moreover, I felt like I was representing the culture of the doctors at Hahnemann. I met so many doctors who balanced clinical practice with patient advocacy on a community, policy, and academic level. I was surrounded by doctors who meet patients where they are at, whether in clinic, in the hospital, or on the OB service. I realized that I wanted to be just like one of these doctors.

My admissions essay [to medical school] centralized around improving healthcare for underserved communities, so I felt I resonated with the culture at Hahnemann. I believe the people in the clinic felt similarly towards me -- nurses, MAs, and residents expressed sadness when I was on my last day of the rotation. Maybe it was the little things, like the silly Halloween photo I took dressed as a Jedi with the other clinic members who had also dressed up. It didn't seem like much on the surface, but to me, it reflected how much I felt like a valued member of the team.