

Victoria Kortlandt

NYIT College of Osteopathic Medicine

A Different Path to Medicine

When I was four years old, my grandmother had an abdominal hysterectomy. I asked to see her “boo-boo,” commented on its large size, and decided to help take care of her as she recovered. By middle school, I was drawn to my science classes in a wide-eyed endless possibilities kind of way. I was always interested in cuts, bruises, scars, disease, nutrition, how the body worked, and also how I could help others. I was meant for medicine, and nothing could convince me otherwise.

My path to medicine, however, was not straightforward. For somebody so sure of her future, I managed to take a very roundabout way of getting there. My circuitous path laid a foundation for me to become more than the average physician, and would never have happened if I had not met Dr. Catherine Dean.

I’d just completed my bachelor’s degree when I began working for Dr. Dean’s women’s health clinic. It was a sweltering summer morning as I hurried to arrive early on my first day. I sat nervously waiting to meet her and enthusiastically shook her hand when she approached me. I told her how much I was looking forward to the opportunity. She gave me a little nod with a half smile and replied, “great.” She was always a woman of few words.

Dr. Dean’s practice was booming. Patients called weeks in advance for their appointments, waited hours to see her, and left feeling it was worthwhile. Dr. Dean had a way of instilling confidence in patients that seemed effortless, and her depth of knowledge never ceased to amaze me. Between statistics, up-to-date research, and new treatment options, Dr. Dean always seemed to be one step ahead of standard care. She knew her field inside and out, and had a flawless way of conveying it to her patients.

As an employee of Dr. Dean’s, I was given a lot of responsibility. She allowed me to run bone DEXA scans and then asked my opinion on

how I would treat a patient with low vitamin D. She’d tell me to go counsel someone on birth control options or discuss the next steps for an abnormal Pap smear. She never coddled me or sang praise for my hard work and accomplishments. She was an “actions speak louder than words” type of mentor. She consistently conveyed her belief in me by trusting me with autonomy.

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One afternoon, a pharmaceutical representative came in pitching a new vaccine that had just been approved for HPV. He raved about “the numbers” being just as good, if not better

than the current stats for Gardasil. He placed a 25-page study on Dr. Dean's desk and left feeling satisfied with a job well done. After reading it herself, Dr. Dean handed it to me. She instructed me to go home and try to read it with a critical eye so that we could discuss it in the morning.

At this point, I'd love to say I dazzled Dr. Dean with my insight and observations.

I did not.

I wasn't able to pick out any issues with the study and had no strong opinions regarding its merits or pitfalls. Dr. Dean proceeded to ask me a series of questions that helped me understand how research articles can be criticized. At that time, I couldn't fully arrive at my own conclusions without her help.

"If you study public health," she explained, "this process will become completely natural to you." She then continued to tell me that getting her masters degree was the reason she felt so confident and capable interpreting research and translating it into advice for her patients. "You're smart," she said. "Consider it."

The next day, I contacted Saint Louis University to make sure I wasn't too late to apply. I was convinced this degree would make me a better doctor in the long run, and jumped on the opportunity as soon as it arrived. I'd been accepted to SLU's school of public health with a scholarship for research. The opportunity helped me shape the kind of physician I hope to be: informed, advanced, and insightful- just like Dr. Dean.

Studying public health gave me the tools necessary to understand Dr. Dean's approach to patient care. It made me all the more excited to start

medical school, and more determined to make her proud of the physician I would become.

Now, in my third year of medical school, I've never been more certain that every decision I made on my path to becoming a doctor was the right one. Dr. Dean fundamentally altered the way I thought about medicine, and I couldn't imagine having things any other way.