



The Patient-Centered Curriculum

John Cornelius Penner

M.D. Candidate, Georgetown University School of Medicine

HOYA Clinic, Georgetown University School of Medicine, Washington, D.C.

Examining our crisp white coats during our White Coat Ceremony, we sat at attention, ready to feel in our pockets the weight of our stethoscopes and to recite the oath that would initiate us into the profession of medicine. Then, with the commanding respect that only experience can provide, Dr. Donald Knowlan, a master clinician, spoke two words that echoed throughout the hall. Two repeated words settled over us, eliciting a sobering sense of duty in the class of 2018.

“The patient, the patient, the patient.”

As a medical student, my first and most profound exposure to the patient occurred in Georgetown University School of Medicine’s student-run free clinic, the HOYA Clinic housed under the roof of the D.C. General Homeless Shelter. Volunteering at the HOYA Clinic has taught me important lessons, such as: maintaining fortitude amidst the difficulties of medical education, serving the underserved, committing to lifelong learning, and embodying the role of patient advocate.

Walking into a HOYA Clinic exam room, my fellow medical students and I face circumstances unlike the ones to which we may grow accustomed in a traditional medical setting. The homeless patients we see at the clinic teach us the mental toughness that will help us persist through difficult times in our medical student careers—work such as sitting down to learn voluminous details of material and pushing ourselves forward even when we make mistakes and face criticism.

In addition to the resilience that student-run free clinics like the HOYA Clinic can teach students, these clinics impart two other important skills on future physicians: leadership and compassion.

In the traditional medical setting, there can be up to a decade between commencing medical school and taking on the role of a trusted physician. However, in the setting of a student-driven clinic, the students become the leaders and teach one another while helping to steer the ship of patient care. Rather than forcing us down in the shadows of the medical hierarchy, this environment teaches us to be leaders to pursue constant improvement as future physicians.

Without compassion and interpersonal connection, leadership means very little for a developing physician. Empathetic relationships help us break down the barriers that may arise due to feelings of fear, suspicion, anxiety, and suffering that the patient may experience. Textbooks teach us to ask patients questions

such as: “How does that make you feel?” and “Is there anything else you would like to discuss?” However, no book can convey the genuine emotions that surface when we receive tears, anger, or despair as a response from our patients. Only the combination of medical knowledge and genuine care can settle these difficult emotions. In addition to cultivating physical health, we must also navigate the emotional and psychological landscapes of the patient, thereby helping the patient achieve optimal, all-encompassing health, rather than simply mitigating disease. We may never be able to make our patients feel better until we can make our patients feel cared for.

With student-run free clinics, we see firsthand what it feels like to balance the roles we know we must take on as future physicians: healer, listener, confidant, and coach. No class, book, or discussion can teach this. We can only learn these lessons behind the closed doors of the exam room—from the patient, who teaches us, and from our superior clinician-educators, who supplement our learning with their expertise.

The day we embarked on our professional path, Dr. Knowlan explained to us the need to “become fully attentive to our patients...less technician and more clinician!” I remember asking myself how we can best learn that skill. Through my experiences at the HOYA Clinic, I realized that the path to mastery involves mindful practice and consistent exposure to the environment in which we will serve. We must put ourselves in situations that combine patient exposure with an atmosphere that helps us embody the foundational values of medicine: service, advocacy, and lifelong learning.

From helping me develop the mental fortitude to succeed in medicine, to showing me the power of empathetic communication, to engraining in me the core principles of medical care, the HOYA Clinic has taught me lessons that do not exist in medical school textbooks. Hidden behind the walls of student-run free clinics, this patient-centered curriculum keeps students connected to the core component of clinical care—always reminding us of the person for whom we all entered this profession.

The patient. The patient. The patient.