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Medical Residency and MPH Program All in One: The Challenge of Being a Student and Having a Life outside of School

Odilichi U. Ezenwanne, MD

ABSTRACT

This essay presents a cautious but optimistic view of finding life balance while enmeshed in the challenging role of being a medical resident, a graduate student in a Master of Public Health program, and having a productive family and social life. His reflection reveals strategies for successful adjustment to new life dimensions.

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In the pursuit of competence in any endeavor there will be demands placed on an individual. More so, if excellence in that field is the goal. This high toll on personal resources is clearly seen among medical students and resident physicians, where a heavy course work coupled with the need to process large volumes of information is routine. Also, there is the added pressure among these trainees that stems from the fact that their decisions directly impact the course of human lives. However there is a need to live a satisfying life outside the hospital or lecture theatre as the case may be, and demands of family, leisure, and hobbies present the case for competing, or in some cases, conflicting interests.

Family forms an integral part of my life, just like for most people it provides me with joy, comfort and a safe arena to be at ease. However it requires a diligent nurturing of relationships which takes a great deal of time and attention. The requirement of time here goes beyond just being present because it is quite common in my experience to find that even when I am at home with my family I have to be intentional about being mentally present with those around me. It is one thing to be physically present but another thing also to be emotionally and socially available to your loved ones. The sad part is that those closest to you can tell when you are obviously preoccupied with other issues and it is a lot easier to take for granted the time you have with the people closest to you under the assumption that you can always make it up to them.

When it comes to leisure, the challenge becomes more daunting because there is always some work to be done or some reading to accomplish. The desire to complete these tasks easily outweighs the need for relaxation, which I try consciously to avoid until

exhaustion takes over, and even then, I find that my inclination is to continue working. In my mind I understand the need to maintain a balance but the drive for excellence in my work is too hard to ignore. Hence, my activities of leisure have evolved steadily from mostly outside activities like visiting friends, to mostly in-house entertainment like watching movies or listening to music. Other activities like sports – soccer and basketball – which I consider to be hobbies, are barely existent in my life currently. I have transitioned to being just a mere spectator over time.

A popular saying is “you cannot give what you do not have.” This is particularly instructive for me because my availability in all spheres of my life is based on the resources I possess. These resources (physical, emotional, mental, social, and financial) are finite and present a significant challenge to manage adequately. I have tried to maintain a balance but I suspect that there will always be a slight tilt towards favoring my work at any point in time. Therefore, the need to preserve equilibrium between life and work must be intentional at all times.

My experience as a resident in general surgery paints a vivid picture. At the point of entry into the program, I had recently relocated from my home country – Nigeria, and was grappling with culture shock. The system of healthcare delivery was different and the demand for prompt results was especially demanding, as one might imagine it would be in the field of surgery. I found myself getting to the hospital a lot earlier than my colleagues and leaving much later to ensure that my share of work got done. Naturally, I got home late after my commute and I only had time to have dinner before usually passing out on the couch only to awake at

3am and start the cycle all over again. My weekends were usually spent paying the sleep debt I had acquired during the week and managing to get some combination of chores done before Monday came knocking again.

Obviously this affected my interactions with my immediate family, but thankfully, not to the point of conflict, but it did not leave much room for life outside the hospital. However, as I progressed in the residency program I adapted to the different system, and became more efficient; this translated to being able to have more time for personal activities. Initially there is a period of total sacrifice but with experience in your discipline you learn how to find a balance that you can live with. There is a caveat though, and that is you must be passionate about what you do to justify this tradeoff; if not, it will be difficult to sustain. Some argue that the motivation required to establish momentum through these difficult times can be harnessed from different sources like the prospect of future financial gains or the eminent social status derived from your position as a professional in your chosen field. However, I believe that anything short of unbridled love and passion for any taxing vocation is unlikely to be sustainable in the long run.

Now, I have transitioned to a Preventive Medicine residency, not because of an inability to endure the rigor of my former position in surgery, but because this new challenge aligns more closely to my future career goals. Nevertheless, I am required to complete a Master of Public Health degree within a year to qualify for promotion, making it a relatively busy time for me. But, the demand for my time here pales in comparison to my previous postgraduate experience. Simply put, I have more time, there are no sudden emergencies, or overnight in-house shifts, or long weekends in the hospitals, which constrict your personal time (and then you have the occasional take-home assignments).

Undoubtedly, I have achieved a better balance between all the spheres of my life in my present position as a Preventive Medicine resident in an MPH program. However, I think this can be achieved in a variety of situations by being realistic with what time is available to you within a program, prioritizing your passions, restructuring your time allocations, and deciding if the whole process is worth the sacrifice. In essence, there are many challenges in maintaining a satisfactory work-life balance, but with careful planning, patience, perseverance, and intentional effort, it can be achieved.

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