

5 Important Lessons I've Learned in Practice

Every day, the world seems to spin faster—and the health care system keeps pace. But despite modern advances, some of the essential lessons a PA or an NP can learn are rooted in “old-school” values. A seasoned clinician shares her top 5 tips from the trenches.

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Health care is a constantly changing field, thanks to innovative research and technological advancements. And with optimal team practice and full practice authority, PAs and NPs are poised to drive further improvements to patient care. But while we all recognize the need to keep learning, some of the greatest lessons I've learned in my career have little to do with the “latest and greatest” tools—they are fundamentals of being a good person and effective health care provider. I would like to share some of them with you.

1 It's OK to make a mistake, but be sure to own it and learn from it.

You can't grow as a person or a provider if you can't acknowledge failure and vow to improve. Don't become complacent; a little bit of fear keeps us on our toes and hopefully out of trouble.

It always seems to be Friday at 4:45 PM when you receive that phone call from the pharmacist asking, “Did you really want to prescribe amoxicillin/clavulanate to Mrs. Jones? She's allergic to penicillin.” You quickly check the EMR and don't see that specific allergy listed. You choose an alternative medication and send the prescription back to the pharmacy.

But while many providers would stop there, assuming that they have solved the problem, I would advocate for calling the patient directly and addressing the is-

sue head-on. The patient may be thinking, “What an idiot, she missed that in my chart.” Clearly, there was a breakdown in the process, but you are the one who is ultimately responsible.

A phone call to verify the allergy and the type of reaction is very valuable. It proves to the patient that you take patient care seriously and that you recognize that the system needs to be improved.

2 Find one thing in common with each patient, even if it is something small.

Maybe you grew up in the same town, or like the same sports team, or enjoy the same type of food. It isn't difficult to find a commonality; a note in the patient's chart ensures you'll remember. That personal touch demonstrates that you care and increases the patient's comfort with you.

This technique can make a huge difference with a “difficult” patient. One day, a new patient presented to my office for a change in bowel habits. He was clearly anxious and angry with his wife (who accompanied him) for “making me come here.”

During the social history, I learned that he owned a trucking business. I asked what kind of trucks. He said, “Big ones!” I was more specific in my next attempt, asking, “Volvo, Peterbilt, International, or Kenworth?” He looked puzzled and said, “I see you know something about trucks.” I

explained that my husband is a diesel mechanic and that we play “identify the truck” when travelling with our young sons. It turned out that my husband had worked on the patient’s truck the week before.

The dynamic of our encounter changed immediately, and we were able to schedule him for a much-needed colonoscopy. He was diagnosed with a large precancerous colon polyp, and I was relieved that our “connection” smoothed the way to getting him the care he needed.

3 Always remember that people are watching.

Nothing is truly private anymore. Social media can be a great forum for exchanging information and knowledge, but you could become the latest YouTube sensation (not necessarily in a positive way) at any time.

When a patient asks if he can record our visit to share with family, I wonder how many have done so without permission. The bottom line is that we, as health care professionals, have a high standard to live up to.

This was brought home to me in my work as a volunteer firefighter and EMT. One night I had barely finished loading a patient from a serious motor vehicle collision into a helicopter to be transferred to definitive care when my phone started buzzing. A photographer from the local newspaper—whom I didn’t even know was on scene—had snapped a picture of me in action and posted it to his online news site and social media accounts. Within 5 minutes, several coworkers had seen it and texted me. My surname across the bottom of my jacket provided a clear indication of where I was and what I was doing. I was absolutely shocked at how quickly news spread, and although nothing untoward or inappropriate was documented, it was unsettling to realize that I was “in the public eye” while I was focused on doing my job.

That photo is now the screensaver on my computer. It’s a daily reminder that someone is always watching and I must conduct myself accordingly.

4 Don’t be afraid to speak up.

Don’t be a tattletale, but do stand up for what you know is right. When presented with a choice, always do the right thing, even if it is more difficult.

This is harder than it sounds; I know how tough it was for me to find my voice. But I did during the case of a middle-aged woman with a significant upper GI bleed. She had been in her normal state of health until she experienced a sudden onset of nausea and vomiting; her husband called EMS when she began vomiting large amounts of bright red blood. Her care plan involved multiple members of our GI service, as well as colleagues from an affiliated tertiary care hospital, and I spent hours coordinating care and obtaining the necessary consults. When the patient subsequently developed abdominal compartment syndrome and required bedside surgical intervention, the attending surgeon proceeded to dress me down in front of the entire ICU team, screaming, “Why isn’t Dr. So-and-so here caring for this patient? Why aren’t you doing anything to care for this woman?”

In the old days, I would have walked away without saying anything—that’s what was expected. But, my own hurt feelings aside, I couldn’t stop thinking, “What if he treats others like that? If I don’t speak up, I’m an accomplice to his bad behavior.” So I waited for his team to perform the urgent procedure and then politely asked if I could speak with him. I was shaking in my shoes when I began by asking if he had read my notes in the patient’s chart. He grudgingly said, “No.” I listed the physicians who had been consulted about this patient and documented the time the team had spent developing a safe treatment plan for her. I ended by saying that it was unfair and unprofessional for him to yell at me, particularly in front of our colleagues, and I asked how he would have felt if treated the same way. He apologized and agreed to approach me privately if he had concerns in future. I can honestly say that encounter changed our working relationship in a very positive manner. One of

the most difficult experiences of my entire career helped me to grow as a professional.

5 Each and every one of us is an educator, even if we don't consciously choose to be.

You can be an educator without being employed as a teacher. Educators go above and beyond to make sure that learning is student centered and that knowledge is received and understood. Every day, we educate patients, families, friends, neighbors, and other members of the health care team.

A few months ago, I began a new paramedic job at a different agency. During training, one of my coworkers made an offhand comment: "It's your fault that I'm here." At my puzzled expression, he continued, "You don't remember, do you? When

you did my last firefighter physical, we talked about the best way to get a full-time job as a firefighter. You recommended that I consider a job in EMS to gain additional experience and interface with the fire departments, so here I am and I love it." At that point, I did recall our conversation—but what I had seen as simple small talk with a patient had really been an educational moment. I had a smile on my face the whole drive home as I thought about how my casual conversation had a positive effect on him and his career path.

PAs and NPs are educators even when they are not presenting in the classroom or serving as a clinical preceptor. It doesn't matter if you are new to the profession or have been working for many years—you have valuable experience that can help someone else. Please remember that even small moments can make a large impact. Strive to be a good educator at all times. **CR**

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