



BY WILLIAM G. WILKOFF, M.D.

LETTERS FROM MAINE

Happy Is as Happy Does

A couple of months ago I was invited to deliver the commencement address at a small high school on Maryland's eastern shore. I was stumped for a topic, so my wife suggested that because

I seem to be enjoying myself most of the time, I speak about happiness. Because I hear and read so much about burnout and professional dissatisfaction among physicians, I thought I would share with you what I discovered about happiness as I researched my address.

Of course, I would speak to the new graduates about the antidepressant effects of exercise, sunlight, and a good night's sleep. But because happiness is not merely

the absence of depression, I needed more insight, so I aimed my computer mouse at Google and typed in "happiness."

I quickly found that despite what the authors of our Declaration of Independence might have written, happiness is not something to pursue. Albert Camus has written, "You will never be happy if you continue to search for what happiness consists of."

In the writing of the psychologist/physi-

cian Edward de Bono, I discovered his observation that "Unhappiness is best defined as a mismatch between our talents and expectations." Every day, you and I see this phenomenon in new parents who have failed to accurately predict how much time and energy it takes to raise a child. Many of them think it will be just a tad more difficult than rearing a golden retriever.

But, how many of us realize that we may be suffering the unhappy consequences of similar miscalculations and choices? I have found it difficult to communicate to young would-be physicians how challenging it can be to see an economically profitable number of patients and still be the kind of physician they would like to be. If I did the math for them, I'm afraid I would discourage most of them from choosing outpatient pediatrics.

However, I learned from the Dalai Lama that being a pediatrician has great potential for providing happiness. He has said, "If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion." He also said, "It is hardly surprising that most of our happiness arises in the context of our relationship with others." It is difficult to imagine many other professions that offer as many opportunities to interact with people and practice compassion as does pediatrics.

But even if you have discovered that pediatrics is the best fit between your talents and your expectations, doodoo happens. How you deal with these disappointments is a reflection of your happiness quotient. Helen Keller has written, "When one door of happiness closes, another one opens, but often we look so long at the door that is closed, we don't see the one that has opened for us."

I read somewhere that happy people have a knack for always looking forward and not dwelling on the mistakes and misdeeds of others. Happy people tend to recall their successes and use them as a springboard to continue forward. I think this is what Albert Schweitzer was getting at when he said, "Happiness is nothing more than good health and a bad memory." I would add that if we are smart we learn from our mistakes and the injustices we have received, but if we want to be happy, we quickly forget them and move on.

The last nugget about happiness that I discovered was from Matt Richey, who writes for the Motley Fool, a financial Web site. He has observed that "Contentment isn't a feeling or a mood, it is a decision. Only by choosing to be content with what you already have can you accomplish your goals. Without choosing happiness, you will be trapped by an ever-expanding appetite for money and all things it can purchase."

That's more good news for us—I'm sure few of us have chosen pediatrics because we thought it would be a way to make a fast and easy buck. ■

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Reference: 1. Abramovits W, Boguniewicz M. A multicenter, randomized, vehicle-controlled clinical study (N=218) to examine the efficacy and safety of MAS063DP (AtopiclairTM) in the management of mild to moderate atopic dermatitis in adults. *J Drugs Dermatol*. 2006;5:236-244.

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