

Quotes to live by: Paving the way to personal and professional success

The author, who served as the associate dean for student affairs at his medical school for 20 years, reflects on classic precepts and his personal and professional experience to suggest how clinicians can achieve a happy and productive balance between work and personal responsibilities

Patrick Duff, MD

In the first 2 years of medical school, the most common reasons for unsuccessful performance are a deficiency in cognitive knowledge, inefficient time management, and poor study skills. Thereafter, however, the principal reasons for poor performance in training or practice are personality issues and/or unprofessional behavior.

In this article, I review the attributes expected of a physician and the factors that undermine professionalism. I then offer suggestions for smoothing the pathway for personal and professional success. I crafted these suggestions with the “help” of some unlikely medical philosophers. (Note: Some variations of the cited quotations may exist.) I have tempered their guidance with my own personal experiences as a spouse, parent, and grandparent and my professional experiences over almost 50 years, during which I served as a career military officer, student clerkship director, residency program director, fellowship program director, and associate dean for student affairs. I readily acknowledge that,



Dr. Duff is Professor, Division of Maternal-Fetal Medicine, Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, University of Florida College of Medicine, Gainesville.

The author reports no financial relationships relevant to this article.

doi: 10.12788/obgm.0326

as major league baseball player Yogi Berra reputedly said, “I made too many wrong mistakes,” and that bad experiences are a tough way to ultimately learn good judgment. I hope these suggestions will help you avoid many of my “wrong mistakes.”

High expectations for the medical professional

“To whom much is given, much shall be required.”

—Luke 12:48

Medicine is a higher calling. It is not the usual type of business, and our patients certainly are not just customers or clients. In the unique moment of personal contact, we are asked to put the interest and well-being of our patient above all else. Our patients rightly have high expectations for what type of person their physician should be. The personal strengths expected of a physician include:

- humility
- honesty—personal and fiscal
- integrity
- strong moral compass
- fairness
- responsible
- diligent
- accountable
- insightful
- wise
- technically competent
- perseverant

IN THIS ARTICLE

Practical suggestions
page 20

Importance of time
page 21

Gratitude, kindness
page 22

“Chance favors the prepared mind.”

—Louis Pasteur, scientist



- sympathetic
- empathetic
- inspiring.

To exhibit all these characteristics consistently is a herculean task and one that is impossible to fulfill. Many factors conspire to undermine our ability to steadfastly be all that we can be. Among these factors are:

- time constraints
- financial pressures
- physical illness
- emotional illness
- the explosion of information technology and scientific knowledge
- bureaucratic inefficiencies.

Therefore, we need to acknowledge with the philosopher Voltaire that “Perfect is the enemy of good.” We need to set our performance bar at excellence, not perfection. If we expect perfection of ourselves, we are destined to be consistently disappointed.

What follows is a series of well-intentioned and good-natured suggestions for keeping ourselves on an even keel, personally and professionally, and maintaining our compass setting on true north.

Practical suggestions

“It may not be that the race always goes to the swift nor the battle to the strong, but that is the way to bet.”

—Damon Runyon, journalist

The message is to study hard, work hard, practice our technical skills, and stay on top

of our game. We must commit ourselves to a lifetime of learning.

“Chance favors the prepared mind.”

—Louis Pasteur, scientist

One of the best examples of this adage is Alexander Fleming’s “chance” discovery of the bactericidal effect of a mold growing on a culture plate in his laboratory. This observation led to the development of penicillin, an amazing antibiotic that, over the course of the past century, has saved the lives of literally hundreds of thousands of patients. We need to sustain our scientific curiosity throughout our careers and always remain open to new discoveries. Moreover, we need to maintain our capacity for awe and wonder as we consider the exquisite beauty of the scientific world.

“I have a dream.”

—Martin Luther King Jr, civil rights leader

Like Reverend King, we must aspire to a world where civility, peace, and social justice prevail, a world where we embrace diversity and inclusiveness and eschew prejudice, mean-spiritedness, and narrow-mindedness. We must acknowledge that some truths and moral principles are absolute, not relative.

“Once you learn to quit, it becomes a habit.”

—Vince Lombardi, professional football coach

Our lesson: Never quit. We must be fiercely determined to do the right thing, even in troubled and confusing times.

“A pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; an optimist sees the opportunity in every difficulty.”

—Winston Churchill, British prime minister

Until proven wrong, always think the best of everyone. The bright side is far superior to the dark side. We must strive to consistently have a positive attitude and to be part of the solution to a problem, not the problem itself.

“It’s all such a delicate balance.”

—From “It’s a Delicate Balance”
by Tom Dundee,
folk singer and songwriter

Our top 3 priorities should always be our own emotional and physical well-being, the well-being and security of our loved ones, and the well-being of our patients. The order of these priorities may change, depending upon circumstances. When urgent patient care demands our presence and we miss a birthday celebration, anniversary dinner, soccer game, or dance recital, we need to make certain that, the next time a conflict arises, we arrange to have a colleague cover our clinical or administrative responsibilities.

We must learn to say *no* when our plate is too full. Failure to say *no* inevitably leads to life-work imbalance. It is always flattering to be asked to make a presentation, serve on a committee, or prepare a textbook chapter, and it is natural to be concerned that, if we decline, we will not be invited again. However, that concern is unwarranted. Rather, others will respect us for acknowledging when we are too busy and will be grateful that we did not accept an invitation and then miss important deadlines. Conversely, when we do say *yes*, we need to honor that commitment in a timely manner.

The importance of time

Perhaps the most common complaints that patients have with respect to their interactions with physicians are that they were forced to wait too long and then felt rushed through their appointment. Therefore:

- We must respect our patients’ time and recognize that their time is as valuable as ours.
- We must schedule our patient appointments appropriately and allow different amounts of time depending upon the complexity of a patient’s condition. We should not consistently overschedule. We need to offer a genuine apology when we keep a patient waiting for more than 15 minutes in the absence of an outright emergency that requires our attention elsewhere.

- When we interact with patients, we should sit down, establish eye-to-eye contact, and never appear hurried.

“You don’t make your character in a crisis; you exhibit it.”

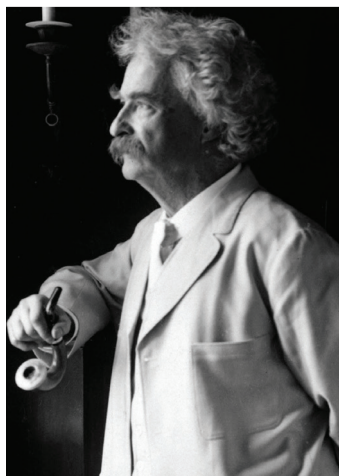
—Oren Arnold, journalist and novelist
In the often-chaotic environment of the operating room or the labor and delivery suite, we must be the calm voice of reason at the center of the storm. We should not yell and make demands of others. We must strive to be unflappable. The other members of the team will be appreciative if they recognize that we have a steady hand on the tiller.

“To do good is noble. To teach others to do good is nobler—and less trouble.”

—Mark Twain, humorist
We need to teach our patients about their condition(s) so that they can assume more responsibility for their own care. We also need to teach our students and colleagues so that they can help us provide the best possible care for our patients. Being a good teacher is inherent in being a good physician. As the famous scientist Albert Einstein said, “If you cannot explain it simply, you do not understand it well enough.”

“It ain’t the things you don’t know that get you. It’s the things you think you know that ain’t so.”

—Artemus Ward, humorist

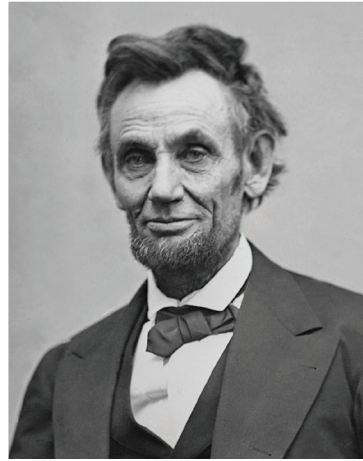


“To do good is noble. To teach others to do good is nobler—and less trouble.”

—Mark Twain,
humorist

“Kindness is the only service that will stand the storm of life and not wash out.”

—Abraham Lincoln, American president



We must constantly strive to practice evidence-based medicine. We should not be the first to embrace the new or the last to give up the old. In medicine, as opposed to the highway, the best place to be is usually in the middle of the road. However, our commitment to evidence-based medicine cannot be absolute. In fact, no more than half of all our present treatment guidelines are based on level 1 evidence. At times, good old-fashioned common sense tempered by years of sobering experience should carry the day.

“We may be lost, but we’re making good time.”

—Yogi Berra, major league baseball player

In my experience, only the minority of mistakes in medicine result from lack of fundamental knowledge or a deficiency in technical skill. Rather, most result from imprudent haste and/or attempts to multitask. Therefore, our lesson is to slow down, concentrate on one task at a time, complete that task, and then refocus on the next challenge.

“The single greatest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.”

—George Bernard Shaw, playwright

We must be sure that we always “close the loop” in our written and verbal communication so that we can avoid misunderstandings that threaten personal relationships and/or patient safety.

“You raise me up so I can stand on mountains.”

—From “You Raise Me Up” as sung by Josh Groban

All of us need a mentor to raise us up. We must choose our mentors carefully and recognize that we may need different mentors at different stages of our career. As we benefit from effective mentoring, we must pay it forward and be a good mentor to others.

“Worrying is a total waste of time. It accomplishes nothing, changes nothing, and robs you of joy. It is like paying a debt that you don’t owe.”

—Mark Twain, humorist

We have to assiduously cultivate the strength of resilience. We must accept that mistakes inevitably will occur and that perfection in practice is simply not possible, despite our best intentions. We then have to learn from these errors and ensure that they never occur again. We need to apologize for our mistakes and move on. If we carry our last strikeout into our next at bat, we are likely doomed to more misfortune.

“Feeling gratitude and not expressing it is like wrapping a present and not giving it.”

—William Arthur Ward, motivational writer

Our lesson is to be keenly aware of the importance of showing gratitude to those around us. The height of our success will depend directly on the depth of our gratitude. The higher we rise in the hierarchy of the medical profession, the more gracious and kind we need to be.

“Kindness is the language which the deaf can hear and the blind can see.”

—Mark Twain, humorist

“Kindness is the only service that will stand the storm of life and not wash out.”

—Abraham Lincoln, American president

There is never an excuse for rudeness or hubris. We should never teach or conduct business by intimidation. The words *please*,

thank you, and I'm sorry should be front and center in our vocabulary. We must learn not to take ourselves too seriously, to remember that the best part of life is the laughter, and to always strive for grace and humility.

“The secret of the care of the patient is in caring for the patient.”

—Francis Peabody, physician

Patients may quickly forget what we say to them or even what we do for them, but they will never forget how we made them feel. Observe intently, listen carefully, talk less. Most people do not listen with the intent to understand. Rather, they listen with the intent to reply. We need to break this pattern by learning to listen with our heart. In fact, the quieter we become, the more we can hear. There is great symbolism in the fact that we have two ears and only one mouth.

“You got to know when to hold ‘em, know when to fold ‘em.”

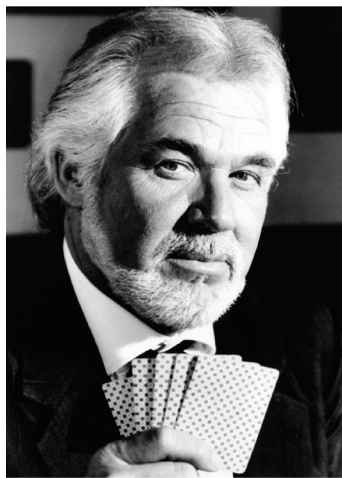
—From “The Gambler”
as sung by Kenny Rogers

Sometimes the best medicine is no medicine at all, but rather a soft shoulder, an open ear, a kind heart, and a compassionate soul.

“Do small things with great love.”

—Mother Teresa, Catholic missionary

The vast majority of us will not rise to lofty political or administrative positions or ever achieve celebrity status. We are unlikely to win the Nobel Prize and unlikely to find the cure for cancer or preeclampsia. However, we can work diligently to complete each small task with precision so



“You got to know when to hold ‘em, know when to fold ‘em.”

—From “The Gambler”
as sung by Kenny Rogers

that, like a great artist views his or her work, we, too, will want to sign our name to the patient care plan we have created and implemented.

“Earn this.”

—From Saving Private Ryan,
a Steven Spielberg movie

At the end of this movie, the mortally wounded infantry captain (played by Tom Hanks) looks up at Private Ryan (played by Matt Damon) and says, “Earn this,” meaning make sure that you live your life in a way to justify the sacrifices so many made to save you. Like Private Ryan, we have to recognize that our MD degree does not constitute a lifetime entitlement to respect and honor. Rather, we have to practice each day so we continue to earn the respect of our patients, students, and colleagues and, so that, with confidence, we can then say to our patients, “How can I be of help to you?” ●