
On Being a Doctor, Physician and Teacher

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To be or not to be....a doctor...that is the question, a paraphrase of Hamlet's soliloquy in the eponymous play by William Shakespeare. Now being the second half of the year and the time of year when senior high school students choose their college courses and take college entrance examinations reminds me of my dilemma. That question is asked by a lot of senior high school students of themselves and by others especially if they are children of doctors as in the case of my son. Well, neither my son or my daughter applied for premed courses unlike my two sisters and I (both of our parents are doctors). It is a life changing decision not only because it dictates what one's role in society will be but it also entails dedication of at least eight years of a young person's life to studying and taking of examinations and financial dependence on one's family.

The word 'doctor' from the Latin word "docere", surprisingly does not mean healer. Rather it means teacher or one who imparts knowledge and this probably explains why the title is not exclusive to those who have studied medicine. The title Dr is also used by veterinarians and graduates of doctorate programs of economics, Philosophy, English, etc. It is the word 'physician' which means healer. And physician refers to one who practices general medicine as distinguished from one who does surgery. Moreover, being a doctor or a teacher does not require one to be employed or be associated with a teaching institution.

Teaching aspiring physicians, especially if they are interested and attentive is truly inspiring. Teaching clinical medicine and life in general, having to deal with and approach patients and their families, how to face successes and sometimes failures in the practice of medicine are some aspects which are not dealt with in the classroom setting. Therefore, not being associated with a medical school because of age (i.e., retirement) or some other circumstance, does not mean that one should stop teaching.

One of the best examples is my father, Dr. Tito Torralba. He was my greatest influence on my choice of career. As a kid, I would accompany him on rounds in the private and charity hospital of the university hospital and observe him during his clinic hours. I met some of his lupus patients and since they were mostly young girls I could interact closely with them. I did consider other specialties but I decided on internal medicine like my father; though I did not do rheumatology, but my youngest sister went into rheumatology.

In addition to accompanying Dad on rounds. He was my teacher and at the same time also our medical school dean. Dad was my teacher in school, in the hospital and even at home. My father was the best illustration of putting into practice what one teaches by showing how a doctor relates with patients. Being the child of the professor is a lot of pressure to a student, but what more for me where he was also our Dean? It brought me a load of pressure to do well academically. Like everyone who went through medicine one of his or her greatest achievement is going up that stage and being handed a diploma certifying that one is a doctor. In my case that achievement was especially sweeter because it was my father who handed my diploma... the dean, the teacher and physician, Dr. Tito Torralba