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He who studies medicine without books sails an uncharted sea, but he who studies medicine without patients does not go to sea at all.

—William Osler

At the Pharmacy

Regardless of how you prepare, it is unlikely that anyone can ever be truly ready to ‘start’ medical school. It isn’t simply the subject matter that makes it difficult, but rather the volume of new information to be assimilated and the lack of time in which you have to do it. For me what makes it something I can cope with is the realization that at the end of the ‘fire hose’ is a lifetime of future patients. I believe physicians when they say it is patients and their stories that sustain you during your life as a healer.

Shortly after I first arrived in El Paso, I found myself waiting for a prescription at a local pharmacy. Prior to beginning medical school this mundane chore would have been easily scheduled into my daily activities and I would not have given it much thought. However that day was different. I now was a strained, stressed and sleepy MS-1. As I waited my turn at the pharmacy window, just one of a room full of patients, my thoughts turned inward and focused on memories of that afternoon, my first clinic assignment at San Vicente Clinic.

As you may know an important part of the curriculum at PLFSOM for 1st year students is their once monthly scheduled clinics. The clinic visits are designed to mirror clinical presentations covered in class during each month. For example, during the cardiac unit our clinic visit will focus on patients who present with heart issues. Clinic training extends beyond mere didactic learning of the features of diseases and allows a medical student to explore the effects and context of illness in a patient’s life as well as the role illness plays and the impact it has on the family as well as the patient’s other social interrelationships. In our clinics we work in the local community with local physicians who are treating the under-served patient’s of El Paso. As a consequence during our monthly clinic rotations we learn the art of medicine as well as the necessity of caring for not just the illness, but most importantly for the patient in their totality as a human being.

Through my physician preceptor, Dr. Luna, his physician assistants and his team of medical professionals, I have learned invaluable skills not taught or mastered by MS1 students attending traditional medical schools. As an example I have learned the importance of active listening and being fully engaged in capturing the narrative of the individual patient’s disease and its story. I have seen firsthand how a few moments of compassionate time and attention can be much more therapeutic than a prescription.

I recalled how during my first day at clinic I experienced a feeling of intense humility upon realizing the enormous efforts that this clinic (among others) around the city of El Paso had and were expending helping to train medical students become better physicians. I recalled the patients I interacted with that day, who by sharing their clinic experiences with me (and my classmates) permitted us to learn from both them and their infirmities. I also felt at this time thankful to be involved in my medical schools unique curriculum realizing the value of community and clinical experiences which are integrally incorporated into our curriculum.

As I waited at the pharmacy, I heard bits and streams of conversations that were occurring around me. At the same time, I realized that in future these patients or patients like these would someday be sitting in front of me in my own clinic looking to me for answers and guidance. As I looked around, I saw my grandfather, my mother and myself in their faces. The overwhelming sense of uncontrolled chaos which had overwhelmed me as I sat to wait had been replaced with a sense of profound gratitude to these strangers with whom I sat and quietly observed.

To be a physician is a special position in life, one in which we have the privilege to receive, learn and treasure from the special state of intimacy that characterizes the clinical encounter. Over the next few years as a medical student I will learn the science of medicine. From Dr. Luna and others like him I will learn the compassionate practice and art of medicine. From my patients I expect to be graced to grow beyond my years and to learn the true meaning of life as a physician— through their narrative.