

Letter to the Editor Regarding “The Vigil of Medicine”

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The Letter

I was pleased reading “The Vigil of Medicine” written by Kelly and wish to applaud the author for her take on the journey of medicine, as she referenced her personal experience backpacking the John Muir Trail.¹ The author’s message of not being alone during this journey brings a warming reminder to students around the globe that we must all continue to push through challenging times (such as the COVID-19 pandemic), as we do so together.

When the author stated, “do not be afraid to take a moment to look behind you”, I could truly visualize a sea of upcoming students holding their own headlights, waiting to begin their paths in medicine. As I enter my final year of medical school, I think about my classmates, and how I hope they know how proud I am of all their hard work, sacrifice, and dedication.

Being part of the “string of headlights that snake up the mountain”, we must understand the important roles and responsibilities we take on as leaders to those that trail behind us. Many medical schools throughout the United States encourage and incorporate leadership development opportunities within their curricula.² In the United Kingdom, medical student societies have incorporated the sharing of stories and experiences from clinical leaders to help better develop medical students as leaders among their peers and future physicians, too.³

While in medical school, it is important for us as students to take on leadership positions within our respective programs and/or communities. Having these leadership opportunities as medical students not only strengthens our relationships with our peers and respective faculty, but it also allows us to learn how to keep the path of headlights behind us burning bright. For example, I had the privilege of developing my leadership skills while as a Peer Mentor (PM) during my second year of pre-clerkship (or pre-clinical) training from 2019-2020. My duty as a PM was to be a source of mental health, personal, emotional, and academic support for incoming first years, especially during their rigorous Fall semester.⁴ In our campus’ location of Detroit, Michigan, we decided to provide snacks nearly every Sunday night/Monday morning to have in the student lounge for our first-year

classmates. The snacks were never of charge to our classmates, as they were meant to bring everyone together in the student lounge, prior to COVID-19 restrictions, to relax and converse in-between lectures. Every week, the first years would express how thankful they were to us for this.

As trust between us PMs and our first-year classmates grew, we began incorporating other events such as subject review sessions, tutoring periods, and even ‘mental health’ walks. During these walks, we would leave campus together as a group and walk to a nearby local ice cream shop several hundred meters near campus. By end of my time as a PM in 2020, I not only was able to help the first years survive a time portion of their pre-clerkship training, but I was able to build strong friendships with them, too. Many of the first years were impacted by how much we helped them as PM and gladly took over duties to be PM themselves once my class graduated from pre-clerkship training. In essence, PM demonstrates one way we as medical students can continue to keep those headlights behind us bright from year to year.

Many students in the United States would agree that the second year of medical school is, undeniably, a challenging year as the stress of preparing for the first round of national board examinations (i.e., USMLE Step 1, COMLEX Level 1) becomes increasingly evident.⁵ Although I admit to feeling this same level of stress when I was a second-year medical student, as did the other PMs, being able to assist our first-year classmates was truly rejuvenating. This opportunity proved to be a unique way for us to build strong relationships with our first-year classmates and, personally, helped strengthen my sense of purpose as a leader.

Reflecting on this moment after reading “The Vigil of Medicine”, I see how our actions as Peer Mentors helped pave the path for our first-year classmates to survive their Fall semesters. Today, as many of our then first year classmates have completed their second year of medical school and are beginning to take their national board examinations, I feel an exuberant amount of joy knowing we were able to help guide them along their paths. Wherever we may be in both the world and our medical training, let us continue to lead those behind us so that the path of headlights can burn brighter for years to come.

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Editor: Mihnea-Alexandru Găman
Student Editors: Leah Komer, Manas Pustake
Proofreader: Joseph Tonge
Layout Editor: Ana Maria Morales

Submission: Jun 1, 2021
Revisions required: Jun 9, 2021
Received in revised form: Jun 9, 2021
Acceptance: Jun 9, 2021
Publication: Jun 30, 2021
Process: Peer-reviewed

Acknowledgments

The author would like to acknowledge Pauline Tobias (Academic and Career Advising Faculty, MSUCOM, Detroit, MI, USA) for reviewing this publication before submission.

Conflict of Interest Statement & Funding

The Authors have no funding, financial relationships or conflicts of interest to disclose.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, Writing – Original Draft Preparation, & Writing – Review & Editing: CPS.

Cite as

Schukow CP. Letter to the Editor Regarding "The Vigil of Medicine". Int J Med Students. 2021 May-Jun;9(2):178-9

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ISSN 2076-6327

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