

MIND TO MIND

Creative writing that explores the abstract side of our profession and our lives

Stephen T. Harvey, M.D., Editor

A Letter to Medical Students from an Anesthesiologist

Michale Sung-jin Ok, M.D.

Good morning,

You probably went to bed later and woke up earlier than most of us. Now you are here to learn about anesthesiology. You are paying a lot of money to be here today. Some medical schools do not even have an anesthesiology rotation. This 1-week rotation may be the only time you are exposed to the art and science of anesthesiology before you must choose your specialty. First impressions are important.

That is a lot of pressure on me.

Let us talk about you. You have excelled at most things you have tried in your life. You have embodied discipline and diligence. Your middle name is resilience. You always rise above the challenge. You never give up.

But above all, you care.

And that is what I care about.

You dream of the day when you will be equipped with the knowledge and skills to help others independently. Someone with your aptitude could have picked fame or fortune, but you chose to serve others. Now, you are trying to choose the specialty that will enable you to become the physician you always wanted to be.

Accepted for publication August 11, 2021. Published online first on September 14, 2021. From the Department of Anesthesia, Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center, University of Cincinnati, Cincinnati, Ohio. michale.ok@cchmc.org.

Permission to reprint granted to the American Society of Anesthesiologists by copyright author/owner. *Anesthesiology* 2021; 135:922–4. DOI: 10.1097/ALN.0000000000003970

You are impressionable. We all know that medical school is incredibly stressful. You are constantly critiqued, and your shortcomings are often publicly discussed. You are somehow expected to have a great attitude even when you do not have the time to eat, sleep, or even use the restroom. You often wonder if you are strong enough to be a physician. This environment can make you somewhat vulnerable. Meeting a kind, relatable resident or attending during a rotation can be such a great relief. But be careful because this can also mistakenly steer you into the wrong specialty. Before you commit, ask yourself whether you enjoyed the specialty itself or enjoyed working with a specific mentor during that rotation. I know a few physicians who regretfully made their decision based on this factor.

Now, let us talk about my journey to anesthesiology.

As a medical student, I loved all my rotations. There was something valuable and wonderful about all specialties. Even though I initially pursued primary care, anesthesiology unexpectedly grabbed my attention, and I have never looked back. It was not my interest in physiology or pharmacology that made me choose anesthesiology. It was not my passion for exciting new technologies, gadgets, or even procedures that made me choose anesthesiology. It was the deeply committed physicians and the way that they cared for their patients that drew me into anesthesiology.

There is a stigma associated with anesthesiology. When I told an emergency medicine resident that I committed to anesthesiology, he said, “Oh, so you don’t want to talk to any of your patients and just want to put them to sleep? That is a shame because you seem like a person that would actually enjoy patient interaction.” That comment bothered me more than I would like to admit. His comment suggested that anesthetic patient care is deeply impersonal. He implied that physicians who really care about people do not go into anesthesiology. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Now, 10 years after I began my journey into the field of anesthesiology, I can confidently say that I am an anesthesiologist because I care. If anything, I care more than I knew I was capable of. I care about learning because my lack of knowledge can have life and death consequences. I care about sharpening my skills because I am often my patient’s final line of defense. I care about medical ethics because we must do what is best for patients when they are unable to guide us. My primary role is to care for my patient’s physical safety during invasive surgical procedures. But I realize that the emotional and spiritual well-being of a patient is just as important for their recovery.

I have been blessed with many opportunities to hold my patients’ hands and to comfort them. I have celebrated my patients’ victories and mourned their setbacks. I have

cried with families who have lost their loved ones and jumped for joy when others made miraculous recoveries. I have had to tell some patients and even other physicians “no” when it was the right thing to do. Believe me, saying that I will not do an anesthetic for someone is much more difficult than doing it. I have learned that the hard way.

I never forget the mistakes that I have made. I always learn from them so that I can be a better physician next time.

At times, I have been shaken to the core because death was imminent for my patient. In those moments of overwhelming terror, I felt the weight of that patient’s trust. They trust that I will do the right thing while they are in a defenseless state. They trust that I will make the right decisions when every second counts. They trust that when I am in a situation that I cannot handle myself, I will not be too proud to ask others for help. That trust is a heavy burden.

But do not worry. You will be trained extensively for moments like these. You will learn how to always be prepared. You will learn that preventing a complication is always better than reacting to one. When medical crises come your way, you will learn how to systematically evaluate and treat them. You will learn that during emergencies, you are not supposed to be a hero. You, with the help of your team, will conquer each situation together. You will win far more battles than you will lose.

Not many will remember who you are. Your face will not be on billboard advertisements for the hospital. But out of the spotlight, and sometimes in complete anonymity, you will do your best work to reduce human suffering. You will use medications and perform procedures that can take away the cruelest of pains. You will rescue airways, resuscitate, and buy your surgeons just enough time to finish life-saving surgeries. You will help patients see their families again.

So, I say to you, the aspiring physician searching for a specialty, we are anesthesiologists because we care deeply about our patients. Join us, and you will find a society of physicians dedicated to patient safety, scientific discovery, and technological innovation. You will find expertise that is invaluable to patients at all stages of life. But above all, we compassionately care for our patients by reducing their suffering through the art and science of anesthesiology. From a newborn baby taking their first breath to the oldest and frailest of patients, we can help.

We care.