



Dermatologic Disquisitions and Other Essays  
Edited by Philip R. Cohen, MD<sup>1</sup>

# Personal reflections on mentorship as a pathway toward sustaining a joyful dermatologic practice: Part II: Our colleagues, our students, and our patients

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**Abstract** Mentorship has always been an important part of dermatology. Clinical dermatologic practice is increasingly busy, and it is paramount that we seek out occasions for joy that will imbue our work with meaning. I have had the privilege of experiencing wonderful mentorship along my dermatologic pathway, and I hope that the personal stories contained herein galvanize readers to search for opportunities for mentorship as a means of creating and sustaining a joyful dermatologic practice.

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## Introduction: finding joy in the midst of a busy life

It is exceedingly difficult to thrive (or to feel like we are flourishing) in all roles of our life at any given moment: parent, spouse, friend, and physician (to name a few). As dermatologists, we strive to excel in patient care, education, and clinical research, while at the same time taking delicate care to nurture the other aforementioned roles within our lives. At times, this may seem daunting, and much research has been conducted to identify ways to maintain “overall life balance” as a way to prevent workplace burnout.<sup>1</sup> To that end, the myriad positive benefits of mentorship on not only the mentee but also the mentor have been increasingly recognized within dermatology.<sup>2–5</sup>

I was recently reading an interview in *Mayo Clinic Alumni* magazine with our president and chief executive officer at Mayo Clinic, Gianrico Farrugia, MD. When asked if he could accomplish one thing at Mayo Clinic today, he said, “We need a culture of joy. We need to deliberately reinstall joy into our everyday work and into the patient experience. Our staff thrives and overachieves when work is joyful and filled with purpose.”<sup>6</sup> After reflecting upon ways I could increase joy in my life (particularly in regard to work), I discerned that mentorship was a wonderful model to achieve this. Through my experiences as a mentee (and now as a mentor to students and colleagues), I realize that mentorship embodies many of the purest qualities that spurred my initial interest in medicine (and thus serves as an ongoing template to fuel this passion), and this excites me and gives me great hope for my future career (and those of others in dermatology).

In this essay, I shall enumerate a variety of my mentorship experiences with colleagues, students, and patients and the lessons imparted upon me from these experiences. In a previous companion essay, I described influential mentors who have

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paved the way for me as I progressed from a student to a junior faculty member, as well as the story of my most steadfast mentor in medicine and life, Uma Thanarajasingam, MD, PhD.<sup>7</sup> It is a special and humbling honor to share these stories with you. I hope you enjoy them and may feel ignited to seek out opportunities for mentorship to increase joy in your dermatologic practice.

### Our colleagues as mentors

I am fortunate to work with an exceedingly talented group of colleagues, and I shall briefly highlight a few of them and how they have positively influenced my clinical practice and life outlook.

Michael J. Camilleri, MD, has won the Mayo Fellows Association Teacher of the Year Award in Dermatology more than any other faculty in the history of our department. His board-review teaching sessions during residency were exceptional, and now as a teacher, I find myself constructing board-review questions for residents in the style of Dr Camilleri.

Lisa A. Drage, MD, is an expert morphologist of the skin, with a keen diagnostic acumen based upon physical examination findings. I admire the way she sees complex patients with a thorough, yet time-efficient, approach and documents her findings in written form in a similarly succinct yet comprehensive style.

Amer N. Kalaaji, MD, was my residency program director and has an engaging and heartwarming personality that enlivens those around him, including his patients. He is equally at ease discussing a patient with immunobullous disease or leisurely strolling around a big city with colleagues during a dermatology meeting. Sometimes, I wonder how much fun it would have been to be his residency classmate!

Julia S. Lehman, MD, is a wonderful clinician and researcher, and displays admirable humility and professionalism in her work. She is quick-witted and remarkably adept in both academic and social settings. Dr Lehman strikes an impressive work-life balance in the setting of her highly productive academic career.

Marian T. McEvoy, MD, epitomizes collegiality and is the most selfless dermatologist I know. She is always willing to cover patient care duties for colleagues who would like to attend a meeting or when personal situations arise. Dr McEvoy also possesses an immense fund of clinically relevant knowledge and is a past recipient of the Mayo Clinic Distinguished Clinician award.

Gabriel F. Sciallis, MD, has practiced dermatology for 45 years and maintains an intellectual curiosity worthy of emulation. He created our community clinic, and I recall as a resident learning how to use spironolactone for acne and acitretin for palmoplantar pustulosis under his tutelage, medications I routinely use today. He also is a big soccer fan, and I fondly remember watching a World Cup game with him in 2014,

along with a few of our residents and the huge smile on his face as the United States mounted a stirring second-half comeback against Portugal.

### Our students as mentors

Teaching dermatology residents and medical students is exceedingly rewarding, and working together with them to diagnose and treat patients with skin disease might be the most invigorating part of my dermatology practice. Perhaps, that is why I cherish my previous awards as Mayo Fellows Association Teacher of the Year in Dermatology (and induction into the Teacher of the Year Hall of Fame), and I believe that they will likely be my most treasured professional achievements when I look back at my career several decades from now.

It is often said that students teach mentors as much as we teach them. One of our former residents, Valerie Lianosz, MD, PhD, embodies this. Several years ago, we were seeing a patient (Mrs. S.) with intermittent and migratory pruritus. Each appointment would start by Mrs. S. showing me a daily itch score log that she had meticulously created. At the end of each visit, Mrs. S. would ask if her itching could be related to her fibromyalgia and would provide me with papers she had printed from the Internet suggesting such an association. I politely thanked Mrs. S. for the information and informed her they were unlikely to be related, but sadly I did not search the literature further. One day, when Dr Lianosz was working with me and witnessed such an exchange, she began to research this question and found several contributions that described a plausible association between fibromyalgia and skin complaints including pruritus. From there, Dr Lianosz proposed that we initiate a research project to look at the skin manifestations of fibromyalgia, which led to a publication in a rheumatology journal.<sup>8</sup> Dr Lianosz showed incredible initiative and an inquisitive spirit to conceive of and carry out a project that I never could have envisioned on my own, and she taught me to always listen to my patients.

### Our patients as mentors

Although it can be challenging in the midst of a harried clinic day, I try to reflect at the end of each day for a few moments on the lessons my patients have taught me that will make me a better dermatologist. I describe two illuminating experiences below.

A few years ago, I saw a middle-aged man with chronic idiopathic erythroderma. Extensive evaluation locally and at the Mayo Clinic failed to uncover a more specific diagnosis, and potent systemic treatments did not help his skin. He was a high

school teacher, coach, and referee, and displayed strength and dignity in carrying out his duties despite frequent comments from his students and athletes regarding his skin condition. This patient taught me about true resiliency. I hope I have the courage to summon his example when I face overwhelming adversity in my life.

Since I completed residency, I had been caring for a man in his early 40s with generalized chronic plaque psoriasis. He was a delightful patient who loved sharing stories about his teenage daughter and who loved outdoor activities, including snowmobiling during the cold and snowy Minnesota winters. For several years, his skin responded well to ultraviolet light treatments, but eventually his disease progressed, and one day he inquired about ixekizumab after hearing about it from a friend. I prescribed the medication and arranged for a followup appointment 3 months later. When he did not attend his appointment, I looked at his chart and discovered that he had tragically passed away a few months earlier in a snowmobiling accident. It was heartbreaking to think his daughter would not have her beloved dad in attendance at her upcoming high school graduation or for any other special moments in the future. This patient taught me about the precious and precarious nature of life and to appreciate and enjoy each day with our family, friends, colleagues, and patients, without expecting that there will always be a tomorrow.

## Conclusions

It is extremely gratifying to know that giving back through the gift of mentorship to trainees and colleagues helps to ensure that such knowledge and lessons will be perpetually shared with others and will benefit patients for future generations. In this way, mentorship can be an integral component to creating and sustaining a joyful dermatologic practice.

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Dr Wetter earned his bachelor of arts from Saint Louis University (St. Louis, Missouri) and his medical degree from Mayo Medical School (where he was selected by his peers as the valedictory speaker in 2004). His Mayo Clinic training includes an internship in internal medicine, residency in dermatology, and fellowship in advanced clinical dermatology.

Dr Wetter's dermatologic clinical and research interests include medical dermatology, rheumatologic skin disease, and hospital dermatology. He has authored and published more than 90 peer-reviewed contributions in leading dermatologic and internal medicine journals.

In addition, Dr Wetter has provided clinical and research mentorship for many residents and medical students and has been selected three times as the Mayo Fellows Association Teacher of the Year in Dermatology (and has been inducted into the Teacher of the Year Hall of Fame).

Dr Wetter cherishes his time with his wife (a rheumatologist) and their three children. He is also an ardent sports fan and karaoke enthusiast.