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RULES FOR THE ROAD

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It was my pleasure to participate in the welcoming process for our new class of residents at The Methodist Hospital on June 26, 2012, for the academic year 2012–2013. A total of 90 fresh, mostly smiling (and a few apprehensive) faces were checking me out. I must have passed muster as they actually applauded when I left the front of the room. I did not use the podium since I wanted to be close enough to look them squarely in the eye. My message was short and personal.

I introduced myself and told them I had been a cardiologist for a very long time — and for 45 years of that time at The Methodist Hospital. Along the way, I learned a few lessons that I wanted to share with them that are largely the basis for my four rules for the road. They are easily remembered and have been very helpful to me in my career.

#1: Attitude is everything.

A negative attitude guarantees you leaving the starting gate last and never being allowed to catch the rest of the pack. Even if things are not going well, a positive approach to problem-solving will serve you better than a negative attitude or blaming someone else. A smiling face opens many doors, invites camaraderie, and instantly establishes rapport. Try it; you'll like it.

#2: Be the best you can be.

You don't have to be the best; just be the best under the circumstances. You won't reach the optimum all the time, but you'll be able to look in the mirror and feel secure that you did your best. And when you reach the top, heed an old proverb and keep climbing.

#3: Become a lifelong learner.

You have left the structured environment of medical school. You are more on your own now. What you accomplish by the end of your residency will be entirely the result of your personal efforts. It matters not so much where you start but what you do along the way. Be sure you explore the world outside of medicine. The duty hours mandated by the Accreditation Council of Graduate Medical Education permit more time than in the past to explore the wonders of our world. Feel free to read poetry, write music, become a fly fisherman or an artist, or whatever appeals to you. The Humanities are a broadening experience. Learn something new every day. And remember, even if you learn something new each day, sometimes

what we learned the day before was wrong or may have changed.

Solidify your purpose in life. I believe the purpose of life is to pursue a purpose in life. If your time comes to retire from medicine, use that opportunity to explore a new direction for your alter ego. The golf course won't always satisfy that goal.

#4: Live your faith every day, whatever your faith may be.

Your faith should remind you of the Golden Rule: Treat your patients as you would want to be treated. All of you look strong and healthy, but take it from one who has personally experienced the other side of the stethoscope, from the patient's perspective. You will become a better physician if you understand both perspectives. Have the courage and faith in yourself to recognize and admit your mistakes; keep track and review them. You can learn much from them.

Consider this personal anecdote. When I was a medical resident, it was not uncommon, even in private hospitals, to have large, open wards with as many as 20 to 30 patients side by side, separated only by curtains. In 1957, there were not nearly as many miraculous drugs, devices, or programs available. Chronic illnesses were at least as prevalent as today, if not more so; consequently, it was not uncommon for some patients to be hospitalized in those wards for weeks or even months. It was my responsibility to take care of those patients and make rounds on them every day, with or without my attending physician.

One morning during rounds with my "Chief," I made an unfortunate remark about an elderly long-time patient trying to recover from a stroke. In my frustration from trying to get him well, I referred to that patient as a "crock." I used a term that was not then or now appropriate in the medical lexicon. Rounds were immediately stopped. I was taken aside and given a verbal rebuke. I was chastised for my dysphemism that prohibited me from doing my best for that patient.

I was asked what I knew about the patient — his background, his likes and dislikes, what his prior life had been like, none of which I really knew. In short, I had failed to come to know that patient as a person even though he had been there for weeks. In my inexperienced mind, he was only an old man who had had a stroke and was not recovering nearly as quickly as I had wished. My mentor then reminded me that every patient has something to teach us every day, no matter how long they linger under our care.

Lastly, I was reminded of the Golden Rule and how I would like to have been treated if I were in that man's hospital bed.

I've never forgotten that incident; it lives with me every day, with every patient. And it should with you. The art and science of medicine is a balance of a healthy dose of caring and of curing. It is never just one or the other. The more you keep that in mind, the better physician you will be and so the more successful professionally. Remember, among the measures that separate a great physician from a good one are the little things you do for your patient. The admirable mantra, *Primum non nocere*, refers not only to clinical care but to verbal choices as well.

After sharing this personal story, I admonished them that we would be monitoring their adherence to the creed of The Methodist Hospital: "ICARE," a creed that well serves my four rules for the road:

- I Integrity:** We are honest and ethical in all we say and do.
- C Compassion:** We embrace the whole person and respond to emotional, ethical, and spiritual concerns as well as physical needs.
- A Accountability:** We hold ourselves accountable for our actions.
- R Respect:** We treat every individual as a person of worth, dignity, and value.
- E Excellence:** We strive to be the best at what we do and a model for others to emulate. If you are the best, you will be a model.

And on this note, I wished them well.

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