

Through the generosity of Charles R. Millikan, D. Min., vice president for spiritual care and values integration, an annual award competition was established at The Methodist Hospital among the resident staff. For the inaugural competition, residents submitted a poem or essay of 1,000 words or less for the topic, "On Being a Doctor." A committee of five was selected from The Methodist Hospital Education Institute to judge the entries. Criteria for judging were established by this committee. This is the third-place winning essay and last in the series.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE, ONE PATIENT AT A TIME

By Grace Kim, M.D.

I believe that the majority of students entering medical school have one thing in common: they want to help people. Despite the wide range of diverse backgrounds and experiences of the applicants, their applications basically boil down to this: "My motivation for being a doctor is that I want to help people, and my application will demonstrate that I have the characteristics and abilities to qualify for the profession." The fortunate few then get accepted into medical school and begin their 7 to 11 (or more) years of training, sacrificing much of their young-adult life so that they can effectively accomplish what they first set out to do: help people.

I am one of those people. I have wanted to be a doctor since I was a child, and the motivation was simple and always has been: I want to help people. However, during my journey through medical school and partially through residency, I noticed that enthusiasm was changing. I have seen patients coming through the ER with gunshot wounds from a gang fight. I have treated patients who overdosed on cocaine and suffered from alcohol poisoning. I have prescribed medications for patients and later learned that directions were not followed because the patient "forgot" to take them. With so many patients who do not even want to help themselves, I began to wonder if I as a physician could do anything to help them.

And then I met Mr. X. It was in the middle of a routine clinic day in Houston's fifth ward. Mr. X came in, recently diagnosed with hepatitis C and fired from his job. He had all his paperwork with him from his clinic, and all he wanted was to be seen by a hepatologist so he could start treatment for his hepatitis C. I submitted a referral on his first visit, and then I received a letter

stating that patients are required to have 6 months of abstinence from alcohol and drugs before they will even qualify to be seen. I gave him the bad news and informed him that I would have to see him once a month in order to ensure that he stayed on track. To this day, he has not missed a single appointment and is always early for his visit. I asked him how he managed to always be on time, and he mentioned that on that particular day, he walked 10 miles in order to make it to our appointment. I was so touched that he made our visits a priority and was willing to sacrifice his time and energy to meet with me. I look forward to our visits and believe that he does too. Every time I walk into the exam room, he always greets me with a big smile on his face, which puts a smile on mine.

We discuss his various struggles during our visits, and I try to encourage him and motivate him to continue to stay sober. As I leave the room, I realize that he is also encouraging me to be the best physician I can. It is patients like Mr. X who help me to press on and continue my desire to help people through medicine. Even if he represents only a fraction of patients who actually take the initiative to help themselves, he makes the years of training and hardship I have endured all worth it. Mr. X reminds me that my initial motivation for becoming a doctor is being lived out and fulfilled.

Aristotle once said, "It concerns us to know the purposes we seek in life, for then, like archers aiming at a definite mark, we shall be more likely to attain what we desire." My desire is the welfare of others, and my purpose is to be the best doctor that I can be, one patient at a time.