

Save Any Lives Recently? A New Grad's Reflection on the Words of the Wisest

Kristin E. Fontes, MD



This is it! You've made it to attendinghood. You climbed out of that consciously incompetent cognitive hole we all fall into near the end of residency, and now you've regained your confidence and are ready to work.

And then you work your first few shifts. You find yourself sweating more than you used to during resuscitations. You second-guess yourself on that patient you sent home. Your priorities are a little different now. Have you asked yourself: How many Level 5 charts have I billed? Am I efficiently managing the department? Am I a good role model and teacher for my residents and students? Am I ordering too many d-dimers? Have I missed something?

What about: How many patients have I truly helped? Although I tried to ask myself this on occasion during residency, it recently drifted down that list of questions and, for a time, failed to make it onto the highway of thoughts that occupied many of my traffic-ridden commutes home after work. When I sat down to write this article, I remembered a learning exercise I used to participate in, and only now am I realizing that it taught me the most important lesson of my career.

During residency, I worked a good number of shifts with Dr. K. He's one of the program's most seasoned faculty and a favorite among the residents. His trim, graying beard, sage eyes, and ability to teach through stories from his experience subtly depict his mastery of our specialty. At the start of his shifts he strolls casually into the ED, and after he's seated at his computer and has finished singing his tune, he'll turn to the resident and ask in his raspy yet soft voice, "Save any lives recently?" The first several times I heard this question, I grumbled to myself, "Nope. Haven't tubed anyone in weeks. Didn't get ROSC on that last code. Haven't even done a cric yet." Then I went back to furiously typing. If I didn't have a case to tell him about, he usually pulled one from his volumes of patient encounters. After several of these stories, I started to realize that saving a patient's life didn't necessarily mean sticking a piece of plastic in them or bringing them back from the dead. It could mean asking the right questions or listening to your "spidey sense" in a challenging case and taking a child out of an abusive home, helping an elderly person get a little extra help to meet their basic needs, or helping a consultant understand your concern about a patient they wanted to discharge. You may never get kudos or a word of thanks about those cases, but you'll fall asleep more easily because of them.

If you work in a teaching hospital, think about your residents and students. They're undoubtedly involved in a rigorous curriculum on top of their hospital duties. They put in countless hours in the effort to translate textbook facts and clinical exposure into a solid practice. Believe it or not, they also want to do a good job for you. As a resident, I always found that I had the most fulfilling experience with the attendings that set clear expectations for me on shift. As part of my own practice now, I make an effort to tell my residents and students to always do what's best for the patient; and I tell myself the same. You may not end up with a wild story to tell your friends at cocktail parties, but you will save lives.

You may have set some goals for your first year out in the "real world," be it a broken record in your head repeating "just don't kill anyone" or an organized list stored in your peripheral brain. I recommend you add one thing to that list. Before you walk into work each day, channel Dr. K. and ask yourself: save any lives recently? You might be surprised at the answer. ■

Are You Ready?

CV and Cover Letter Review Service: Enhance your credentials. Increase your job opportunities.

YPS Members

The Young Physicians Section (YPS) offers FREE curriculum vitae review for YPS members as part of your membership! YPS — Invested in your future.

Graduating Residents

For \$25, have your CV & cover letter reviewed by an experienced member of the YPS board! The service fee will be applied to your dues if you join AAEM as an Associate for Full Voting member. This offer is only valid for the year following your residency graduation — so be sure to take advantage of it today!

www.ypsaaem.org/cv-review
info@ypsaaem.org

