

Just Say Yes – or No – What Is a Young Physician to Do?

Bob Stuntz, MD RDMS FAAEM
Board of Directors, YPS Director



Saying *no* is not my strong suit — just ask my wife. For as long as she has known me, I have been the poster child for what not to do. When asked to do most anything at work, I usually say yes. For instance, as chief resident I remember telling my wife how much I disliked quality assurance meetings. Her response: “Knowing you, you’ll be chairing the QA committee one day.” Sure enough, I have been our

QA committee chair since 2013.

Saying *yes* has actually been an important part of my career as a young physician. I have certainly been busy, but saying *yes* and putting in some extra time at work outside the ED has really allowed me to develop my career. Even chairing my group’s QA committee has taught me a great deal about running meetings, being an excellent emergency physician, and dealing with medical error. Being willing to say *yes* to opportunity has also allowed me to serve AAEM, which has led to many wonderful experiences. However, as I near the end of being able to label myself a “young physician,” I am finally learning to say *no*. Being a residency program director and the father of two young children, and trying to achieve that mythical “work-life balance,” has taught me that I simply cannot say *yes* to everything. So as a young physician, when do you say *yes* and when do you say *no*? I believe this will help guide you.

1. **Set your goals, and be open to opportunity.** Possibly the most important part of a successful career is knowing what you want and what your goals are. Use the last six months of residency and your first six months as an attending to try to answer some questions for yourself. How much money do you need to live, and how quickly do you want to pay off your student loans? Where do you want to live, and what kind of practice environment do you want? What do you want in terms of your lifestyle? What do you want to do with your career in EM? While these goals may change over time, setting goals in the short, medium, and long term will help guide your future decisions.
2. **Get board certified, and learn the ropes.** Each year I tell my residency graduates to spend the first six months at their new jobs studying for their Qualifying Exam, and learning to be an attending. Part of this plan includes saying *no* to the many opportunities you will be offered when you start out. Unless you are self-employed, or flying around the country doing locums work like some of my graduates, you will likely be asked to do something non-clinical in your first few months of practice. Whether it’s teaching, sitting on a hospital committee, or making the group schedule, new attendings are often asked to help out. If you have found the right practice, they will fully understand that you need some time to focus on achieving board certification and learning to be an attending.
3. **Find mentors and ask their advice.** One of the great benefits of membership in the AAEM YPS is our mentoring program. As a young physician, you should find mentors locally and nationally who are on a career path similar to the one you desire, and ask what they did.

Get as much advice as possible. Having good mentors can make a huge difference early in your career.

4. **Start with yes, then say no more often.** Much like taking a patient history, we want to start broadly and then narrow our focus. Early in your time after residency, say *yes* more often than *no*. Especially in the short term, be willing to try new things, even if they may not seem totally up your alley. You never know when you might find something that sets you off on a new career path. As you grow in EM and in life, your goals and interests may change. As you gain experience and are able to focus your goals, start saying *no* more often. Only say *yes* to those opportunities that will enrich you personally or professionally, and to which you are truly willing to commit. If you said *yes* to something but find it doesn’t interest and enrich you, don’t be afraid to back off and find someone else for the job.
5. **Be “all in.”** Anyone who has run a committee knows the type. Honestly, we have probably all been that type at one time or another — I know I have — the person who is on the committee in name only, who puts it on their CV but doesn’t do any work. If you find that you have overstretched your commitments, don’t be afraid to trim some of the excess. Focus on those things that enrich you personally or professionally, and remove the things that do not truly peak your interest.
6. **Re-examine and reset.** As you approach the end of your time as a young physician, re-examine your goals and priorities. If your goals and priorities have changed, make sure you realign your commitments. Look for new mentors who have gone where you want to be. And be a mentor to the next generation of young physicians.

While patient care and being an emergency physician are our primary responsibilities, the things we do outside the clinical setting can contribute greatly to career satisfaction and longevity. Hopefully, this will help you decide what to do outside the ED. And as we go into the fall, I strongly urge you to say *yes* to getting involved in AAEM — I promise you will be better for it! ■

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