The Two-Year Interview
By Charlie Brown, DO, Colette McLemore & Patricia Burnett, PhD

I have met all of the requirements to graduate from medical school and earned the residency I wanted most. I’m becoming an adolescent psychiatrist and have the next six weeks of vacation to reflect on what I’ve learned, without the challenge of an exam. When I think about the critical ingredients for success, they don’t come from journals or textbooks. Although these resources provide the subject matter for medicine, I can read them and clarify concepts in study groups. What I believe is the framework for a successful career in medicine is the everyday behavior demonstrated in the medical office or on the hospital floor.

While medical students often worry about “the interview,” that hour exchange during which you persuade the director of medical education to hire you, I believe that your two years of pre-doctoral clinical education comprise the most important interview you will experience. So, I offer you some tips for that two-year long interview. During this interview, I would like you to set aside the fact that you are not passionate about pediatrics, you expect a personality conflict with the orthopedics attending, or that all of these rotations are interfering with your personal life. These rotations constitute a lengthy, two-year interview that will impact the achievement of your ultimate career goal.

Rather than share with you short term tips on engaging the interviewer early in the discussion, dressing for success, or demonstrating factual knowledge about the benefits of the hospital’s program, I’m sharing with you my perspective on not merely surviving the two-year interview, but excelling in it.

Tips for Success—Behaving Professionally

Above everything else, know the rules and don’t assume. Maybe in the classroom you showed up late for the lecture or left the hall to take a phone call. Now that you’re in the clinical setting, things need to change. Although you are reporting to the attending, everyone is watching. You didn’t know that you should not take cell phone calls while rounding? Better find out ahead of time. You didn’t know you shouldn’t leave early without clearing it with the head resident? Better get it approved before she can’t find you on the hospital floor. You didn’t know that playing video games in the hospital’s library is no substitute for reading the journals. Better discover this before your game scores are the topic of discussion.

Develop mentors, not just for academics but for your soul. Mentors serve many roles beyond career inspiration. They are the people who help me hammer out my values as I make critical decisions or caution me when I make a wrong turn. My mentors include people with and without degrees. They are people who celebrate my successes and give me a soft place to land. They include the custodian who urges me to take a study break to play cards and destress, my undergraduate professor who still tracks my progress, and the attending psychiatrist who influenced me to choose his field as a career. They are my family members and friends.

Treat every rotation as if it is your specialty choice. Show interest. Remember, the attending has spent years studying and practicing in the specialty that’s not at the top of your list. He has invested his life in the specialty and expects your respect for his life’s work. Just because you have little interest in choosing this field, does not excuse you from performing your best work. This is your opportunity to learn material you might not utilize every day, but will inform your knowledge base as a well-rounded practitioner. Not to mention, you will impress your preceptor, even if this specialty is not your passion.

Check out expectations before the rotation begins. To prepare for your arrival for the next rotation, call the attending to introduce yourself a week before the starting date. Let her know you are looking forward to the rotation, clarify starting times, and find out if there are any recommended readings. When you arrive in the office a week later, the attending will be ready for you. She’ll be happy that you’re eager to study the content of her specialty.
You can’t know everything, so don’t act like you do. Everyone, including your attending or chief resident, will know if you are formulating answers out of thin air.

Start early; leave late. When you begin that new rotation, arrive early and leave late. What a pleasure to know your way around the office, meet the staff, and understand your schedule prior to the attending arriving. The same goes for the hospital floor. When the clock strikes five, your continued presence to complete an H&P on a newly admitted patient reflects positively when it’s evaluation time.

Keep the personal, personal—in the face-to-face as well as the electronic arena. As you spend more and more time at the hospital, your colleagues feel like family. But, there is an invisible line you should not cross. Unfortunately, the line becomes visible only after you violate the institution’s informal norms. You cannot control the information you shared confidentially with the head resident once it leaves your mouth. Keep your text messaging private and your Facebook professional. Maintain positive discussion about others, share your opinions about politics and religion on a limited basis, and keep your love life, yours! Learn to say, “I don’t know.” Then look up the material and make sure you revisit the topic at an appropriate time. You can’t know everything, so don’t act like you do. Everyone, including your attending or chief resident, will know if you are formulating answers out of thin air. Why don’t you just state it up front, “I don’t know, but can I make an educated guess?” or how about, “I don’t know now, but I will tomorrow.”

Check out your performance by the midpoint of a rotation. You think you’re doing well. You feel part of the team, and there’s no negative feedback. You’re going to sail through the rotation, right? Wrong! You can’t assume you know how others perceive you. You must obtain a reality check. Ask for time to discuss your progress with the attending or the head resident. Ask for areas of improvement. You still have time to demonstrate that you understand and can change.

Know that the attending is not the only one interviewing you. The staff enjoys longstanding relationships and observes you from unique areas of expertise. They go to lunch together and know the attending. They are watching you at the lunch table, the patient’s bedside, and at staff conferences, all the while evaluating you. The staff will informally mention to the attending during a quick consult their perceptions of you. You want those perceptions to be positive. Do not let your professionalism lapse just because you’re comfortable with the hospital family.

Network. Attend professional meetings; but of course, request time off in advance from the appropriate person. Since my first year as a medical student, I have benefitted from my involvement with professional organizations. As an SNMA member, I have taught, counseled, advised, and inspired others on local and national levels. In turn, I have been mentored, enlightened, nurtured, and educated by physicians, scientists, and fellow students I’ve met at professional gatherings.

Have options. I know you want to go into pediatric dermatology at a major academic center on the East Coast. You have performed well in your rehearsal rotations and have met the right people. But, there are only three positions in the nation. What’s your back-up plan? You need to have one or you will likely scramble in March. Explore with your mentors some of the specialties that can serve as a helpful foundation for your top choice and build alternatives into your plan.

Finally, enjoy every minute of your clinical training. It is your opportunity to bring your integrity, dependability, accountability, and intellectual curiosity to the most privileged of professions. If you follow these tips and stay on top of your knowledge base, you will demonstrate that the difference between ordinary and extraordinary is just “extra.” Keep giving your work that “extra.”

ABOUT THE AUTHORS


Colette McClemore is the Assistant Director of Multicultural Affairs at Ohio University College of Osteopathic Medicine.

Patricia Burnett, PhD, is the Director of Student Affairs and Assistant Professor of Family Medicine at Ohio University College of Osteopathic Medicine.