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**Can’t We Have Both?**

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“You should want to enjoy your life outside of your profession.”

 “How long is the residency for that specialty, again?”

 “Will you be able to make time for family?”

 As a future woman physician, these are questions that I, and many of my colleagues, get asked on what feels like a daily basis. I know there is truth in these words. I will be the first to acknowledge that certain medical specialties may make having Work-Life-Integration (WLI) more difficult. As I began thinking about what specialty I want to pursue, I have found myself caught between two versions of myself. While one reminds me the importance of building a profession that excites me to work every day, another tells me to take a step back and make sure that specialty will also give me the best balance with life. This internal duel always left me wondering: can’t I have both?

Many years of experience and many pioneering mentors later, I have learned that, yes, it is going to be more difficult to achieve WLI in some specialties, but that does not mean that it is impossible. I find myself more empowered to go into every clinical rotation with the mindset that it could be the career passion I have been looking for. Though it may take bouts of trial and error, I truly believe one can find WLI in the specialty we are most passionate about. In fact, I now genuinely believe that a profession built on the foundation of one’s biggest passions is the one that will bring the greatest contentment and balance.

In my assessment, WLI means developing a lifestyle that provides opportunities for one to achieve both personal and professional goals. WLI allows individuals to have a successful career without having to sacrifice their own personal responsibilities and aspirations. The profession of a physician is an emotionally and physically challenging one. Physicians often hold the lives and well-being of their patients in their hands, and WLI is crucial to ensure that physicians are handling the stresses that come with the profession in a healthy manner. This balance is vital, as it ensures physicians’ ability to continue providing their patients with the optimal care. Still, achieving WLI can be challenging, especially for women physicians.

According to the American Medical Association, women physicians are more likely to experience burnout (54.5%) than their male counterparts (42%).¹ They also are more likely to feel undervalued in the profession than their male colleagues.¹ A 2023 study published in The Permanente Journal attributed these gender-based disparities in burnout rates to increased workload both at work and in the personal sector outside of work, decreased resource availability, work flexibility, and compensation, and more frequent experiences with negative organizational culture and microaggressions.² I am extremely passionate about the physician profession, in which I will be able to support patients and their families through difficult times. Knowing the gender disparities faced by women physicians to this day, I am inspired to develop personal strategies to navigate through these challenges effectively.

First and foremost, I aim to form and maintain healthy personal relationships outside of medicine. Spending time with family, friends, and peers outside of the workplace is essential to ensuring we, as physicians, are not consumed by our profession. I believe that strong personal relationships serve as a two way street on which both parties are afforded an opportunity to reflect on the events and emotions of the day, while also providing an opportunity to explore interests and discussions outside of our careers. Equally as important will be spending time with myself in self-reflection, be it discovering and pursuing hobbies and interests outside of medicine, maintaining personal healthy habits, or exploring opportunities for leadership, career, or personal growth. I also believe I will find WLI by ensuring I have a carefully curated task list for each day. By organizing my goals, both personal and professional, for each day, being willing to prioritize some responsibilities over others, and allowing delegation of tasks, when needed, I believe that I will be more present for each task and more successful at accomplishing them by the end of the day. I know that everyday will be different, and no day will be a perfect equilibrium between work and personal responsibilities. Some days will push me to the limit. Other days will require my undivided attention to work or to family. Ultimately, by self-reflecting on what I have accomplished each day and affording myself some grace as I strive to do my very best, I am confident that I will slowly hone and perfect WLI over time.

It is easier said than done, but I hope that this essay serves as a reminder that though being a woman in medicine is not without its challenges, it is possible to strike a balance and find success in both work and life. Drawing inspiration from the women physicians before us who were the firsts in their fields, we can work to discover both our professional passions and maintain healthy, balanced lives outside of medicine. Surely, we can have both.

References

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**Biography**

Sowmya Kolluru is currently a second-year M.D. Candidate at Creighton University School of Medicine in Omaha, Nebraska. At Creighton, Sowmya is actively involved in health policy and global health research and service efforts. As a future physician, she hopes to provide culturally competent medical care to diverse patient populations. She aims to build a profession rooted in addressing social determinants of health, promoting health literacy and preventive medicine, and advancing research to expand healthcare knowledge and improve health outcomes.