



The Meaning of Student-Run Free Clinics: Staying Connected to Your Purpose in Medical School

John Bryant Rode

Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth

Gretchen Rubin famously coined the adage, “the days are long, but the years are short,” in her 2009 book “The Happiness Project.” These words were etched into my memory on the very first day of medical school when Dr. Roshini Pinto-Powell, our Dean of Students, offered her advice on maintaining a healthy perspective throughout the four challenging years to come. This phrase has a unique meaning to different people, but as I am sure many current and former medical students can attest, the days can be even longer than you think. Long days sitting in a lecture hall, endless afternoons spent poring over an infinite pile of textbooks and notes, and eternal nights spent in a library sifting through case study after case study. So what makes it all worth it? What is your purpose in medical school that gets you through the day? Undoubtedly, these are very personal questions. Questions every medical student knows the answer to without hesitation until those long days seem even longer. We are always told not to forget this purpose, but the hardest task is finding out how.

Some of us are called to medicine from an experience caring for an ill loved-one, others as a childhood dream to care for individuals at their most vulnerable moments, some from enduring their own personal health hardships. The list goes on. But the one common thread that connects all of us in this field is a dedication to serving others. This is medicine in its purest form, a science of healing that is found at the core of our collective purpose. Remembering this purpose enables us to get through even the most demanding days of medical school. One way I have been able to maintain a connection to this purpose is through managing the Mascoma Clinic for the past year, a student-run free clinic that serves the Upper Valley of Vermont and New Hampshire.

The Upper Valley is truly a community in every sense of the word. People band together in the winter to survive the subzero temperatures and in the summer to enjoy the breathtaking scenery from the mountains, lakes, and rivers. But this rural setting brings along its own unique set of challenges. Community members are faced with significant hardship in the form of poverty and a dire lack of resources. Adding to their adversity is the fact that according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, New Hampshire endured the second highest rate of opioid-related overdose deaths in the country in 2016.

Despite these challenges, kindness and generosity are a cornerstone of the community. Patients who live up to two hours away are often driven to the clinic by volunteers who want nothing other than to help their fellow neighbor. And while our patients think that the volunteer medical students are giving so much to them, they have no idea how much they are giving back to us. Aside from allowing us to practice the clinical skills we are taught every day, these patients assist us in the practice of remembering why we are here. They help us stay connected to our purpose. So if you find yourself frustrated with the endless grind of studying and need a helpful reminder of your purpose, I encourage you to get involved with your school's student-run free clinic. While the patients you see will make you better clinicians, they will also make you a better medical student by helping you remember that maybe the days aren't so long after all.