The Plight Of General Surgeons

by Amanda McGowan

I read a commentary piece on cnn.com [1] the other day headlined “Why Primary Care Doctors Are Fed Up.” The article was written by a primary care physician in California who says that the availability of primary care doctors in the United States is lessening, and the reason is because PCPs are underpaid, overworked and under appreciated.

“How many diabetics do I struggle with, trying to get them to take better care of themselves? How many hours have I spent with teenage diabetics who will not check their blood sugar and forget half of their insulin doses?” the doctor writes. “Hundreds of hours seem wasted until one day they open their eyes and want to take care of themselves. My reward for years of struggle is a few hundred dollars at best. The savings to society for my hard work and never-give-up attitude is in the tens of thousands of dollars.”

The timing of the piece was perfect, as I had just added a news item to our website reporting that behind PCPs, general surgeons are also among the highest in-demand physicians in the country today. As general surgeons are often considered the “primary care doctors of surgery,” the article says fewer and fewer surgical students are choosing general surgery as their specialty, and a shortage of general surgeons is emerging.

This discussion got me thinking in broader terms about why we choose the careers and specialties that we do. I admit, as I sit here at my desk, past business hours, two days before my deadline, the thought has crossed my mind: “Why did I choose to become an editor, again?”

The reality is, I chose to become a editor because at its core, the career involves what I love—writing. For me, words have always trumped numbers and formulas. It's what I am good at, and a career that allows me to go home at the end of the day feeling like I served a purpose and served that purpose well.

I assume that when you chose to become a general surgeon, you didn't do it for the money or the recognition, but because the purpose you wanted to serve was taking care of people in the best way possible. At its core, general surgery lets you do that. I guess for general surgeons, operating on the abdomen always trumped the brain.

Maybe general surgery doesn't always seem as glorious as neurosurgery or some other surgical specialty, but the next time you're feeling underappreciated in your field, remember why you became a general surgeon in the first place.

Think about passing on that inspiration to the younger generation of surgeons choosing their specialty. It's an important purpose that is crucial to the well-being of your patients, and from the looks of it, a purpose that is unrightfully fading into the background.

Why did you choose your surgical specialty? E-mail me at Amanda.McGowan@advantagemedia.com *[2]*

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