Dr. Harmon: The moment I knew medicine was my calling

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Physicians are privileged to see patients at their most vulnerable, to reshape lives and continually revitalize the nation’s health system. In a challenging practice environment, physicians remain driven by the power of healing and the indelible connections they form with patients and families.

The *AMA Wire*® “When I Knew Medicine Was My Calling” series profiles a wide variety of doctors, offering a glimpse into the lives of the busy women and men navigating new courses in their careers and in American medicine. No matter their age, their specialty or their career stage, they were born to do this and they tell us why.

**Share a moment with:** Gerald Harmon, MD, a family physician in Pawleys Island, South Carolina, and chair of the AMA Board of Trustees.

I was born to: Help others heal.
**The moment I knew medicine was my calling:** My third year of college I was offered an opportunity to pursue a career in medicine while I was in the military reserves. I had never entertained the thought of a medical career, but a new health professions scholarship program was developed and I applied.

**An experience from residency that confirmed my calling as a physician:** I was attending an ill newborn as a second-year resident, and the infant’s severe heart defect required emergency helicopter transport two hours away. The weather was atrocious yet the military flight crews and leaders trusted my judgment to ask them all to risk their lives transporting the critically ill baby. It was a tough call, but it quickly matured my feelings that doctors had a high calling.

**An experience from medical school that kept me going:** My first exposure to clinical medicine other than the cadaver lab for anatomy was to attend a postmortem autopsy of a patient who literally had been hit by a train! After I got past that gruesome reality—something I had never really counted on—I figured I might make it as a doctor!

**My source of inspiration:** My wife and best friend Linda. She’s a career nurse and is Florence Nightingale personified. No better health care role model.

**My hope for the future of medicine:** That the “golden age” of medicine is always ahead of us—the greatest discoveries and experiences truly lie in days to come.

**The hardest moment in medicine and how I got past it:** My niece and nephew, ages 2 and 4, were fatally injured in a vehicle accident early in my career. Up until that time, my three children had never been exposed to the death of other children and assumed their “doctor dad” and his colleagues could literally make all children well. It was a sobering experience for me and I did suffer some self-doubts about medicine for a while, but I found strength in my brother and his wife who survived and gave me a purpose to continue my career.

**My favorite experience working with the medical team:** Watching and teaching new students—med students, residents, nursing students—you name it. We all have a good experience learning medicine as a team.

**The most challenging aspects of caring for patients:** The incredible volume and rapidly changing perspective of health care options. When I began medicine toward the end of the 20th century (sounds ancient, I know) we were still using textbooks and libraries, had no internet or cell phones, and most ulcer patients and heart patients came to major surgery. We have had an explosion of technology and treatment options over my three decades in medicine.

**The most rewarding aspect of caring for patients:** Unquestionably, the gratitude of my patients and their families. It is so heartfelt and sincere when they express thanks that it moistens my eyes.
every time. Very few human beings get to share that sensation.

The skills every physician should have but won’t be tested for on the board exam: The ability to sit, and speak to, and communicate with, patients and families in an effective manner. It truly is an art and a learned skill.

One question students should ask themselves before pursuing medicine: Am I truly devoted to the profession as a calling and not just a way to have a job?

A quick insight I would give students who are considering medicine: Buckle up; you’re in for the ride of your life. It doesn’t get any better than this!

Mantra or song to describe my life in medicine: “Lean On Me,” by Bill Withers.