Lauren Benning: Reducing the obesity stigma

AUG 17, 2018

Staff News Writer
On the move with: Lauren Benning, a medical student at Campbell University School of Osteopathic Medicine who is eyeing a future in obesity medicine.

AMA member since: 2016.

What inspired me to pursue a career in medicine: In college, I fell ill, and visited numerous health care providers to discover the underlying cause. At some point, I was told by a physician that I needed to change my diet because it was contributing to my poor health. I decided to try eating a lower carbohydrate, whole foods diet, and saw my health dramatically improve. Through researching my symptoms, I became interested in human physiology, and the way we treat chronic diseases using the traditional medical model. It then became my mission to incorporate nutrition counseling into a career in medicine.

How I move medicine: I am taking time between third and fourth year of medical school to research multimodal obesity interventions and food policies that promote healthy eating at Duke University. One of my goals for this year is to learn how to design clinical and community-based programs to promote wellness, particularly in resource-poor communities. I completed the majority of my medical education in rural settings with underserved populations, so finding creative and cost-effective ways to help people achieve better health is important to me.

Career highlights: Before medical school, I wrote and photographed a cookbook of healthy recipes and sold it on Amazon. In medicine, at the 2018 AMA Annual Meeting, a resolution I wrote with a team of medical students was adopted by the AMA Medical Student Section. It was a proposal to add warning labels to junk food, and I had heard of some opposing arguments before it came up for a vote. When it passed, it felt like such a triumph that I cried after leaving the microphone.

The process of drafting the proposal took months. Spearheading the resolution-writing process and seeing it through to the end taught me about leadership and the value of building a network of supporters to bring an idea to fruition.

Advice I’d give to those interested in pursuing a career in medicine: Training to become a physician can be an arduous and lonely journey. If you surround yourself with supportive people who share your mission, the process will be much less overwhelming. I am grateful to have found my “tribe” within my medical school classmates and the AMA. They have given me mentorship and encouragement when I needed them, and I would not have made it this far without them.

Aspect of my work that means the most: Reducing the stigma associated with obesity and taking a practical, nonjudgmental approach to treating it. We can do so by respecting people at whichever stage of weight loss or weight maintenance they’re in, while focusing on the goal of improving health, rather than fixating on an ideal body type. We are living in an environment that is designed to make us overeat. If we can educate fellow clinicians and our patients on how to address the biological and
emotional factors that compel individuals to make unhealthy choices, and pass laws that curb the insidious influence of Big Food companies like we did with Big Tobacco companies and smoking, we can make real progress in addressing one of the gravest public health threats of our time.

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