



Mark A. Kashtan, MD, MPH: Maintaining empathy in the OR

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Staff News Writer



The AMA “Members Move Medicine” series profiles a wide variety of doctors, offering a glimpse into the passions of women and men navigating new courses in American medicine.

On the move with: Mark A. Kashtan, MD, MPH.

AMA member since: 2011.

What inspired me to pursue a career in medicine: When I was in fifth grade, a family friend was diagnosed with breast cancer. She was one of the most loving, motherly people I’ve ever known but never had children of her own.

For the next two years, my mother made sure I spent time with her as she went through surgery, chemotherapy, physical therapy and eventually recurrence. I was too young to totally understand everything that was happening, but the feeling of being a part of someone’s journey for health never left me.

How I move medicine: I try to exemplify in my own life and practice what I think medicine should look like—anchored in empathy, understanding and, most of all, a shared humanity. I volunteer a lot of my time working with organizations such as the AMA that are trying to make health care work better for both patients and physicians. And I talk to my peers about the issues in medicine that go beyond what we see in the hospital every day.

Career highlights: I have served on the governing council of the AMA Medical Student Section and the AMA Resident and Fellow Section. In those positions, I’ve been privileged to see a generation of aspiring and young physicians find their voice, and the energy and altruism they bring to the table is exactly what our profession needs as we take on the challenges of modern health care.

I also am fortunate enough to be a surgical research fellow at Boston Children’s Hospital, which I consider the premier children’s hospital in the world. The caring and intelligence of the people I get to work with there is unmatched.

Advice I’d give to those interested in pursuing a career in medicine: A career in medicine can be an all-consuming part of your life. Don’t forget to make time for family, friends and a few of the things you do that make you unique and keep you well balanced and happy.

Taking care of yourself so that you are the best version of yourself is an important part of taking care of your patients with the skill and empathy they deserve.

Aspect of my work that means the most: Spending time with patients is the part of my work that means the most to me. In surgery, you may have a very short amount of time to get to know your patients, and it often comes when they are having one of the scariest and most significant days of

their lives.

The trust that is placed in you is an incredible responsibility and a privilege, and those moments when you make a difference in someone else's life are when you know there is nothing else you'd rather do.

How I advocate for physicians and patients: I try to stay up to date on the goings-on in Washington, D.C., that affect physicians' ability to take care of patients, and talk to my elected representatives when particularly good or bad ideas come to light.

I talk regularly with my peers about these issues to make sure that tomorrow's doctors understand that health policy can be as important for the health of our patients as making a difficult diagnosis or providing treatment skillfully. It is easy to lose track of the bigger picture when you are working so hard at your medical training, but it is so important to pursue every avenue you can for your patients.

My hope for the future of medicine: I hope to see our country figure out a system where the sick get the care they need regardless of race, gender or the balance of their bank accounts. I hope to see us talk about quality of life, and create a mindset that it is just as important as the length of life.

And I hope to see a health care system that is driven more by empathy and respect for our fellow man than the almighty dollar.

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