

Deena Kishawi: Mentoring young Muslim women

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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: Deena Kishawi, who is a third-year medical student at the Loyola University Chicago Stritch School of Medicine.

AMA member since: 2018.

What inspired me to pursue a career in medicine: I ultimately decided on medicine because I felt I had a strong connection with my community—I’m socially aware of the needs of my people, and I can share with them the medical knowledge they need in order to become healthier. I connect with them on a level beyond the patient-physician relationship because I’m a daughter of immigrants, an Arab Muslim hijab-wearing woman, and I was raised in the inner-city, and learned and taught about cultures and languages other than my own. But through all this, I learned the language of care and compassion—a skill that would serve invaluable.

How I move medicine: As my preclinical years in medical school progressed and I started to narrow down specialties, I realized that I was having a hard time finding a mentor that looked like me. I began to conduct research into hijab-wearing Muslim women in surgical specialties to determine where the disparity lies.

I began a mission to increase the awareness of the barriers that exist for hijab-wearing women in surgery and I created a set of educational supplemental materials, as well as a national campaign and a website to help provide solutions for hijab-wear in the operating room. Through this initiative, I hope to educate and empower young Muslim women who wear hijab to pursue surgical specialties and feel comfortable entering specialties in which they might be the only hijab-wearing woman. I’m currently working on engineering the perfect medical and surgical hijab.

Career highlights: My greatest accomplishment to date is this campaign, “Hijab in the OR,” and the impact it is having on the younger generations of hijab-wearing Muslim women who might have considered surgery as a specialty but have hesitated due to their religious compliance with appropriate dress. Many of my other accomplishments stem from Hijab in the OR, such as presenting at national conferences like the American Medical Association, Association of Women Surgeons, Diversity in Medicine, and American Association of Orthopedic Surgeons to name a few.

Advice I'd give to those interested in pursuing a career in medicine: For those interested in pursuing a career in health care, I'd recommend always reminding yourself why you are making this decision. Remind yourself of the drive for your passions—be it community change, health and political advocacy, human rights, or whatever your motivation is. There will be days, weeks even, when the stress and heaviness of health care can take a toll on you, so remembering what your passion is will keep you pushing through the difficulties.

How I give back to the community: I am actively involved in my community, both the one that I grew up in as well as my medical community. Within my larger Chicago Arab and Muslim community, I am actively involved in events, activism, and mentorship for young aspiring Muslim women who hope to enter medical, pharmacy, or dental school. I volunteer to look over applications, conduct mock interviews, or assist in career and academic planning. In terms of patient and physician advocacy, I am heavily involved in researching functional outcomes to ensure that hospitals can implement solutions to create better care for patients and better delivery of care by physicians.

Aspect of my work that means the most: Many physicians can complete the adequate training to be skilled physicians, with low mortality rates or fantastic ratings—however, to me my connection to my patients and their social stressors or cultural backgrounds or barriers is what means the most to me in my career. I want to garnish the personal connection with each of my patients to ensure that they are receiving the ultimate health care possible to enhance and improve their overall well-being and to advocate for them and their needs.

My hope for the future of medicine: My hopes for the future of medicine are trifold. On the patient side, I hope that all people residing in America, regardless of their citizenship or insurance status, can receive adequate health care without having to worry about cost, immigrations legalities, or cultural barriers. On the physician side, I hope that all trainees can pursue specialties that they are interested in without having to worry about the gender disparity that often discourages them from applying. On the medical education side, I hope that we make medical education more efficient with a predominant focus on clinical training and expertise, while also providing a holistic approach to our physicians in training.

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