Medical student moms face challenge of pandemic parenthood

MAY 7, 2020

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Less than two months ago, Stephanie Strohbeen, a third-year medical student at Medical College of Wisconsin-Central Wisconsin in Wausau, was on the hospital’s maternity ward—as a patient.

“I had a scheduled C-section on March 16, right when everything is kicking off with stay-at-home orders,” said Strohbeen, an AMA member. “It was eerie. My husband and I walked into the hospital, and it was the first time things had been so strict. They did screenings anytime my husband left. He was the only who could be in the room.”

Five weeks after giving birth to her third child, Leo, Strohbeen was in a well-child clinic—as a trainee.

In both instances, the COVID-19 pandemic was front of mind. “I was terrified to go back to clinic,” said Strohbeen who has since transitioned to online learning. “It was a well-child only clinic, where we weren’t supposed to be seeing patients with a fever. However, that’s not always possible. So, I was scared.”

Finding time to parent, train

Parenting and attending medical school concurrently is a tall task. Add a pandemic into the mix, and the degree of difficulty ramps up considerably. Strohbeen is trying to balance all three realities.

“It’s difficult to force myself to carve time out with a newborn,” Strohbeen said. “I’m trying to make sure I focus a certain amount of time on studying each day. …. I think it’s important to keep to some semblance of a schedule.”

In terms of physical interactions with patients, the week Strohbeen spent in that well-child clinic is a rarity. During the pandemic, medical students generally are not involved in the care of patients—due to a suspension of direct patient-facing activities that has been in place since mid-March. That leaves many students at home full-time. If you have a child, they too, are at home full-time due to school and
child-care facility closures.

Natasha McGlaun, a second-year medical student at the University of Nevada, Reno School of Medicine, is in her dedicated study window. During that time frame, medical schools give students a number of weeks to prepare for Step 1 of the United States Medical Licensure Examinations—and that process is also surrounded by uncertainty.

Instead of spending full days in the library, McGlaun is attempting to study in a makeshift office—also the nursery for her 16-month-old daughter, Laurel—while trying to drown out the sounds of “Sesame Street.”

“It’s been a tough transition to do work from home,” said McGlaun, an AMA member. “I’m trying to talk to her about separating my work-life from my home-life where I’m able to hang out with her. She’s at an age right now where she doesn’t really understand.”

**Significant other support**

McGlaun and Strohbeen benefit from support from their partners. Both say their significant other is the primary parent while they train to become physicians. “It’s been hard on him,” McGlaun said of her partner, Emilio. As their daughter has become more active, it’s been more difficult to find activities that provide a quiet distraction.

“Right after we started quarantine, she discovered walking,” McGlaun said. “So, she wants to run around, pull things off the shelves and bang on the door of the room I’m in.”

Most medical students, Strohbeen believes, are rigidly organized. Routine is especially important for medical student-parents. Still, considering current circumstances, you have to give yourself a break, she says.

“I’m very much a person who likes schedules and likes routines,” Strohbeen said. “It works well for my kids and my family, but during this time it’s not something that’s quite as possible. You have to allow yourself some grace. Allow yourself some wiggle room. It’s OK to not stick to the same schedules and routines. Remember that you are first and foremost parents.”

Though she says her stress level has been “through the roof,” during the past two months, McGlaun believes part of medical training is living with uncertainty.

“Med school is always evolving,” she said. “It is always hard, no matter what situation you are in. The first year of med school is a big learning curve, just figuring out how to adapt and become more flexible. Med school has been a great way to prepare for these massive changes in my personal life.”
The AMA has curated a selection of resources to assist residents, medical students and faculty during the COVID-19 pandemic to help manage the shifting timelines, cancellations and adjustments to testing, rotations and other events at this time.