5 things young physicians should know about mentor relationships

OCT 25, 2022

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Mentors are vital to making a successful transition from residency to practice, and their role in shaping a doctor’s future and present goes beyond that.

Brandi Ring, MD
Brandi Ring, MD, is associate medical director for obstetrics and gynecology at The Center for Children and Women-Southwest—in Houston, a practice owned by the Texas Children’s Health Plan that offers a wide range of outpatient medical and dental care. Throughout her career, she has played the role of both mentor and mentee. She offered a few insights on the value of mentor relationships for young physicians.

Seek them out

A good mentor may be harder to find than they were during training where mentor relationships are largely built into the curriculum.
“There is a need to be willing to approach people randomly and say: I’m looking for someone who has had this problem in the past,” Dr. Ring said. “When you find the right person, ask if they are able to offer advice. That getting permission part is really important. You have to give them an opportunity to say they don’t have the bandwidth.”

Learn with the AMA about three tips to take the private physician practice route after residency.

Look for variety

Some mentors can help you with local questions, such as how you function in your health system, and some can give you bigger picture advice. None can help you with every question you encounter.

“You don’t need to find a single mentor that is going to tell you about every aspect of your life,” Dr. Ring said. “You can find one that is going to focus on one single aspect and those relationships don’t have to be forever. Understanding that was freeing for me.”

As you continue the journey to being a young physician, the AMA Transition to Practice series has guidance and resources on deciding where to practice, negotiating an employment contract, managing work-life balance and other essential tips about starting in practice.

Match the mentor to the situation

If you have a number of mentors, matching the physician with the situation shouldn’t be a problem.

“When I was trying to decide if I was going to leave my first job, I reached out to some mentors who had transitioned from private practice to academic medicine and said what are the things I need to know about this transition?” Dr. Ring said. “How can I make it easier on myself to do this?”

Do you know these five networking tips for job-seeking residents and fellows?

Don’t force it

When it comes to mentor relationships, a shared area of interest or a common problem may not be enough to make it work.

“You can ask more than one person for advice,” Dr. Ring said. “If you talk to one person, hear what they have to say and think: That’s one way to do but not the way I would do it, there’s nothing wrong
with looking for someone else who might take a different approach that is more helpful to you.”

Read this Q&A with AMA member Elisa Choi, MD, to learn about mentoring women to challenge outdated leadership traditions.

**Expand the definition**

Too often in mentor relationships, there is the assumption that only age can bring wisdom. Dr. Ring said experience is a much more qualifying factor in selecting a mentor.

“Many of us have in our mind that these relationships are an older person mentoring a younger person, but everyone has problems that can be learned from a mentor of any age,” Dr. Ring said. “It may just be that they have gone through a similar situation, maybe they have insight on the geography in which you work. That doesn’t have to be age-related.”

Here are six more points to keep in mind when seeking and securing mentors.