3 tips to help resident physicians balance service, learning

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Resident physicians are stretched thin meeting their commitment of service to patients and their obligation to grow professionally as a learner. Striking a perfect balance between service and learning during residency training is a challenge. There are some measures that residents can take as they strive toward that goal.

“A major part of residency is obviously learning and growing into a great physician,” said Oluwabukola “Bukky” Akingbola, DO, a second-year ob-gyn resident at the University of Minnesota. “When you get out, programs aim to make you the most competent attending possible. But it is hard to be realistic with your time as a resident and find time to study away from clinic. Rotations can be very demanding, and we are also required to do research projects.”

So how can residents find time for professional development while the system stretches them thin? Dr Akingbola and a veteran GME faculty member offered insight on that question.

Understand the value of experiences

One of the major differences between residency and medical school is that the way knowledge is gleaned largely moves from a classroom setting to a clinical setting. That transition can be an adjustment, particularly for newer residents.

“Everything you do in residency, on some level, is educational,” said John Andrews, MD, the AMA’s vice president for GME innovations. “In residency, you need to be a much more active participant in your own education and learn how to extract new knowledge from the clinical encounters that you have on a moment-to-moment basis. Some people do that very well and some people don’t. It’s a big challenge.”
Turn to the AMA Thriving in Residency series for timely guidance. Get resources and tips about navigating the fast-paced demands of training, getting scientific research published, maintaining health and well-being, and handling medical school student-loan debt.

**Track deficiencies**

You aren’t expected to know it all as a resident, but you are expected to identify and address knowledge gaps. Because you may not always have the bandwidth to learn on demand, Dr. Andrews recommends keeping tabs on what you don’t know.

“Having some way to track things that you hope to learn more about, when you do have that space and time, is helpful,” said Dr. Andrews, a former residency program director. “You might be on rounds and a question might come up—‘what’s the pathophysiology of a disease?’, for example—and maybe you're on a rotation that's so clinically demanding you don't have time to really study that. But if you got a little notebook, you can write it down and remind yourself to learn more it when you have free time.” Learn how to maximize the power of your naps during medical residency shifts.

**Know your bandwidth**

The demand of rotations can widely vary. Less demanding rotations can present an opportunity to catch up on some of the material that may have been left unaddressed.

Dr. Akingbola is currently on an ultrasound rotation, which offers her more flexibility to dedicate time to honing knowledge than a rotation such as labor and delivery.

“I definitely read more on this rotation than I did when I was on a busier one like labor and delivery,” she said. “So, I definitely do think that that is an excellent piece of advice, to read more when you are able to do so.”

Study schedules “can really be helpful too,” she added. “I will follow a schedule to a tee for some reason, but that might be the way I operate and not helpful for everyone.”

Discover four tips to help residents become telehealth superusers.