To succeed in medicine, find the right mentor at the right time

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Medical school is hard enough as it is, but it can be even harder to get through alone. That is where a mentor can help. As a medical student, having a mentor may be one of the most valuable resources on your journey to becoming a physician.

While you certainly can succeed in medical school without a mentor, having one can make all the difference especially when making tough decisions such as choosing a medical specialty. But how do you find a mentor in medical school? A child and adolescent psychiatrist shares what to keep in mind.

The AMA’s “What I Wish I Knew in Medical School” series offers medical students the chance to gain insights from some of today’s top physician leaders on how they would have done things differently in their early days of training and practice.

In this installment, Laura E. Halpin, MD, PhD, a child and adolescent psychiatrist with Southern California Permanente Medical Group in Downey, California, took time to discuss what she wishes she had known about finding a mentor when she was in medical school. Dr. Halpin is also an alternate delegate in the AMA House of Delegates for the American Psychiatric Association.

Identify what you want

“I’ve been someone who’s mentor heavy. I’ve definitely had mentors throughout, and I find it super helpful,” said Dr. Halpin. But you have to “know yourself and what you want.”

“Whether it was a high-school counselor, pre-med counselor, mentors in medical school, all along the way I’ve always benefited from having someone else to talk through things with,” she explained. “It’s helpful for me to get a lot of input, to visualize what it would be like and what comes next, so it’s been helpful finding a mentor.”

“If you’re the kind of person who finds having someone to bounce ideas off of, having someone to talk through advice about things and having someone help you understand what it’s going to be like at that
next step and make decisions—keep that in mind when looking for a mentor,” she suggested. For example, you would want a mentor “who could meet with you every one or two months just to give guidance.”

“Otherwise, it depends on the decision you’re trying to make,” Dr. Halpin said, noting that could be figuring out a summer research project, which specialty to pursue, how to balance having a family in medical school, or how to make your schedule for your third year.

Look for more than one mentor

“I was an MD-PhD student, so I did two years of medical school, three years of grad school and then the last two years of medical school,” Dr. Halpin said. “As part of grad school, I had all kinds of research mentors who would help with doing PhD stuff—the mentoring is much more formalized.”

“I had all these built-in clinicians and researchers from that process, but then all along I was super undecided about what specialty I wanted to do,” she said. “So, I had a really important mentor starting a little before grad school because I wanted to make sure to stay in touch with clinical stuff while I was doing research.”

“I met with her every month for about five years, and it was helpful in terms of figuring out what I wanted to do clinically, making sure what I was doing from a research perspective had clinical relevance and then finding all sorts of cool opportunities for me,” Dr. Halpin said. “The person who I met with on a monthly basis helped me figure out specialty choice, but they couldn’t give me advice on designing my PhD dissertation, but there were other people who I used that were specific to that role.

“So, know it doesn’t all have to be one person,” she said.

Turn to someone you admire

“Sometimes it can start off as just someone who you admire—someone who seems to have it together, is doing what you want to do someday and has a career that they seem happy in,” Dr. Halpin said, noting “there are a ton of impressive people at medical schools.”

In other words, “this person has some aspirational qualities that you want to achieve,” she said.

Look to who you’re comfortable with
“Finding a person who you feel comfortable talking with and sharing your thoughts with is important,” Dr. Halpin said. That means you can “share what you’re looking for and this is what you’re trying to do.”

This is important because “when things go well, they’re going to be a great cheerleader,” she said. “And then also there’s someone who’s going to be supportive when maybe things aren’t going so well or you need to change direction.”

“So, you should feel really comfortable speaking to them,” Dr. Halpin emphasized.

Put yourself out there

“Take opportunities to interact with people whenever you can,” Dr. Halpin suggested. “A lot of times medical school will have a mentoring fair or other events where students have a chance to interact with faculty.

“Whether it’s through a specialty like the cardiology club, neurology club or psychiatry club, those student-interest groups can be a great way to find a mentor,” she added. “Just make sure you’re putting yourself out there because it does end up being a right place, right time thing.”

Make sure to do a follow-up

“A lot of times after that initial connection is made in a lecture, on a clinical clerkship, at a meeting or other place, you have to take the initiative and reach out,” Dr. Halpin said. “Follow up with an email or phone call and say that you would like to discuss a topic further.”

“Identifying that this is a person who I want to learn more from and then taking that initiative can make a big difference,” she said.

Contact the dean of students

“When you meet with the dean of students or someone in the student services offices to get to know them early on in medical school, let them know you would love to be connected with a physician who can help you with X, Y, Z,” Dr. Halpin said. Ask if they “know of anyone who might be a good fit or if there is anyone on faculty who is doing this sort of work or has a certain career.
“Then that may help you. They may see things in you that they also know are common in their faculty members and then can make that connection,” she added.

**Look for similar interests**

“Most people teaching at medical schools also have good potential to be great mentors and in different areas because they’re passionate about it,” Dr. Halpin said. “They want to see people succeed and they also probably have years of experience in getting people in the right direction and seeing if this type of person may fit with this type of experience.”

They can also identify “a ton of students have done this experience and it helped them figure out whether or not they want to do a certain specialty or they want to pursue a research year or whatever the decision is you’re trying to make,” she said.

**Be open to who you meet**

“It’s a lot of the right place, right time and you don’t know when you’re necessarily going to meet someone,” Dr. Halpin said. “I’ve met mentors on the bus going from the hotel to the conference center and then that’s someone who I have a long-standing professional relationship with five years later.

“You never really know when you’re going to meet the right mentor, but it’s good to always be open to it,” she added.

**Look beyond physicians**

“There are different types of mentors, but keep in mind what you want and know that you don’t have to get it all from one person,” Dr. Halpin said. “If you want guidance on figuring out what your specialty is going to be and seeing what different specialties might be like, it’s important for that person to be pretty clinical.”

“Other things that happen as a part of medical education involve working on research projects or advocacy initiatives,” she said, noting that “those don’t have to be all physicians.”

**Offer to work on a shared topic**
“Mentors have all of this experience and knowledge, but they may not have the time. And as a student or a resident, even though it doesn’t feel like it, you have more time and more opportunities to build skills,” Dr. Halpin said. “So, if you find there’s a topic that you’re both really interested in, you can offer to write a case study, give a presentation, write a paper, design a research project—that sort of thing.

“That is helpful to them because then they get to do those academic activities that are important to them to do too,” she added. “Most people in academia probably always have a mental list of five to 10 unfinished projects that they’re just waiting for someone to work with them on. So, it’s beneficial to both the mentee and the mentor to have that stuff worked on.”

Get involved in organized medicine

“The American Medical Association and the county and state medical societies are great places to get involved in,” said Dr. Halpin. “There are a lot of people who are really happy and passionate about what they’re doing, so it’s easy to be inspired by them.

“And, often, the people in those realms who are mentoring or motivated by working with medical students usually tend to seek the students out themselves,” she added.