



A Conscious Focus

—By Elissa Fuchs

Sometimes, a physician may wonder: How do my own experiences affect my professional decisions and actions? Do I ever make untrue assumptions about patients? Is anything interfering with my ability to be an objective observer?

Personal introspection benefits doctors by allowing them to focus their attention more directly on clinical matters and resolve internal biases. In the University of Rochester School of Medicine and Dentistry residency training programs, young physicians are learning to apply this skill, generally known as mindfulness or personal meditation, to their everyday workloads.

“Medical training is difficult and intense, and young doctors don’t know how they will handle these stressful situations beforehand,” said Ronald M. Epstein, M.D., associate dean for educational evaluation and research at Rochester, which has implemented a mindfulness-oriented curriculum for students, residents, and practicing physicians. “Mindfulness lets residents be intentionally responsive to mentally taxing events. Otherwise, they may become inattentive, disconnected, or burned out.”

In the medical arena, mindfulness is formally defined as the practice of deliberately maintaining self-awareness within the immediate environment. The idea is that doctors and trainees who are aware of the effects of certain stressors, such as treating complicated patients or managing a vigorous curriculum, will generally try to find an effective way to cope with and overcome these challenges. An article published earlier this year in the journal *Advances in Health Science Education: Theory and Practice* found that Australian medical student well-being improved after they engaged in a mindfulness and lifestyle program shortly before a stressful exam period. In particular, students’ average hostility and depression scores decreased by a statistically significant amount (from 0.62 to 0.48 for hostility and from 0.91 to 0.78 for depression). Nearly 91 percent of students reported that they personally applied the program’s mindfulness practices. Better stress management may be a factor in students’ improved well-being, the study authors concluded.

Negative biases or reactions can be detrimental to patient care, said Michael S. Krasner, M.D., assistant professor of clinical medicine at Rochester who is also involved with the mindfulness program. Physicians trained in mindfulness also are usually more receptive to new information, making them less susceptible to committing cognitive errors.

“Residents who are not mindful have a tendency to close down prematurely on a diagnosis,” Krasner said. “Mindfulness can really address these cognitive pitfalls. Mindful doctors may say, ‘It looks like this, but what else could it be? Maybe I am mistaken here.’ Mindfulness really allows you to have a panoramic view of a situation.”

Rochester faculty said their institution is the only place they know of where the mindful curriculum is required for virtually all residents and medical students. The residency component tries to help learners cope with challenges they face, like their first exposure to death or new patient care responsibilities, so that they can become more satisfied and effective health care providers. Private foundation funding enabled the program to get under way in 2007. Its rationale, Epstein said, is that introspection can be learned with practice over time.

The course consists of eight 90-minute modules focused on different aspects of mindfulness, like stress and burn-out or witnessing suffering. After a didactic introduction, the trainees break up into groups and share relevant patient care experiences. Generally, residents focus on instances when they handled situations well, such as taking time to calm down before dealing with a seriously ill or noncompliant patient.

“The hope is for residents to learn and generalize these coping skills for when the going gets rough,” Epstein said.

The program teaches listeners to respond “mindfully” to these stories. They are instructed to pay close attention without commenting too soon, even counting silently for five seconds if necessary. These listening skills can not only improve the conversation at hand, but can also carry over to patient care situations.

“These exercises are about teaching residents to pay attention, and be nonjudgmental, curious, and attentive to whatever activity they are engaged in,” Epstein said.

In these conversations, the listeners learn to ask open-ended questions such as “what surprised you about this patient?” or “how did you respond?” These questions can help the storyteller explore the experience more deeply and foster more self-awareness in future situations. Outside of class, Epstein said, residents are encouraged to record their experiences in journals for future reflection.

As another program component, residents learn to monitor their own physiological reactions to situations, such as an increased heartbeat or a tense neck, to recognize when stress may be affecting them. They practice finding moments to calm down and regroup during anxious times of the day.

Yogangi Malhotra, M.D., a 2008 graduate of Rochester’s pediatric residency program, said that when a young patient’s family questioned her competence as a physician, she used the program’s mindfulness techniques to deal with the situation constructively.

“At first, I felt a bit defensive,” she said. “But when I became aware of my reaction—I could feel my heart beat fast and my irritation growing—I sat down and talked to the family.”

From that conversation, Malhotra realized the underlying reason for the parents’ abrasive attitude: The couple was dealing with serious financial and marital problems. Once she had a better understanding of the situation, “my relationship with them and their child got a lot better,” Malhotra said.

These are the types of results that Rochester faculty hope to uncover during the program analysis, Epstein said. Surveys examining residents’ burnout, mindfulness, and compulsiveness will allow the program’s leaders to reflect on the reflection exercise itself.