

The Hidden Truth: I Want to be a Doctor in Lebanon

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What do you want to be when you grow up, a question we have all been asked as children. Each one of us chose to become a physician at different stages of our academic journey, some during high school and others during college. I guess we all went through that certain situation which led to this decision.

However, little did we know what was awaiting us. No one ever told us the truth about the struggles we will have to face. Is it actually worth it? Or will it drain us from every moment of hope? Will we reach a turning point and just give up?

In 2010, when I sat for the MCAT, I thought this was it. If I score high, then my future has been set and everything will be smooth. I believed that my hard work, perseverance, and excellence will help me in every step of the way. But that is not completely true. The other half of the truth is actually hideous. It depends on your religion, political view, contacts, and much more. In Lebanon, a certain number of spots in medical school are allocated for each religious sect or political party. Therefore, having an acquaintance in the medical jury responsible for the entrance approvals makes a huge difference. Many unqualified students have been accepted into medical school, thus increasing the number of incompetent physicians.

One of the inevitable elements of life is stress. Our upbringing and support system, consisting of family, friends, environment etc... play an essential role in preparing us to overcome this stress. If we are not ready, it can break us. Stress escalates at every crossroad of our path, from sitting for the MCAT to choosing our sub

specialty and applying to different hospitals. Yes, there is stress in every aspect of life however what we go through to become doctors is at a whole new level. It could lead to burnout, depression and even suicide. Why is that in your opinion? Let us dwell on a few of the main reasons. During medical school, we become preoccupied with rotations and lectures that we have to attend and study. We gradually disconnect from our usual surrounding outside of medical school. This affects our social and personal life. You see it is hard to keep in touch with our non-medical friends especially in Lebanon where most seek to continue their fellowship or career abroad. Is there anything that can be done about it? Don't you agree there be at least one psychotherapist in every medical school? Cognitive behavioral therapy will help medical students to cope with all the stress and problems they will encounter.

It is obvious that over the years the number of medical schools in Lebanon has increased, resulting in an excess of graduating medical students. Metaphorically speaking, the supply of doctors is much more than the demand in our country. This lead to not getting accepted to the fellowship program we intended for, changing our careers, being victims of doctor shopping, the list just goes on and on. Everyone is familiar with the phenomenon "doctor shopping". Having an overflow of physician just augments this addiction. You see patients always like to hear the answer that they have in mind. Well actually, it is more like they are in denial that there is actually a medical problem. So, they will keep on going around until they find that one incompetent doctor that reassures them.

What about the doctor- patient relationship and interaction? We are trained thoroughly during medical school about this topic in our Ethics class. Unfortunately, due to the media and to certain television programs this relationship has been breached. Many medical errors have been displayed to the public without any raw evidence. The public judges doctors without giving them the chance to defend themselves. This has caused physicians to lose their integrity and jobs. It is detrimental, especially when there has been no medical error to begin with. Physicians are reflected to be non-trustworthy, thus allowing the patient to cross the limits. There is a trend in Lebanon where the patients have the personal number of their doctors therefore calling them at any time. I assume you as readers agree with me that Doctors are human just like everyone else and should enjoy their privacy. It does not stop here because most of the times when the doctor does not answer the call, he is labeled as an uncaring, and unreliable physician. Furthermore, the doctor to doctor relationship is also very critical and important in our field. It is well known that our profession is very competitive and everyone wants to be the best. Some physicians are obsessed with the idea of winning even at the expense of other physicians.

As if these issues were not enough to deal with, here came 2020 punching us right in the face. I will state them in chronological order. Actually, all the mishaps began in Lebanon starting mid October 2019. The first to appear was the famous and non- ending revolution. Personally, I do aspire for a better Lebanon. A country we all dreamt of where we do not even have to think about emigrating. A country where we can live in our own dignity without having to worry about whether our religion or doctrine will dictate our fate. A better country for the upcoming generations. When will we reach that common ground where we can all accept our different and contradicting opinions without having to end up with a corps? As I said earlier, it is a perpetual protest. What were the consequences of the corruption in our country? Our currency fell to the ground. Our savings and salaries lost their value. As a fellow, my salary basically is equal to 200 USD.

Then the famous Covid 19 pandemic hit us all. Physicians, nurses, practical nurses were the front liners in this crisis. Their personal and family health was put on the stakes. Both the revolution and the pandemic affected our future plans. Many electives were cancelled. Many countries are currently under lockdown and are not accepting foreign medical students or fellows. I have

worked hard all these years and have sacrificed my comfort so that I can travel abroad to pursue my sub-specialty. My opportunity just slipped through my fingers. Imagine, reaching this point and having your dreams just fade away. It takes a huge effort to keep striving and not losing hope. What came later did not make it any easier on all of us. On August 4, 2020, Beirut, the capital of Lebanon, was reshaped. It was turned into ashes. Having to live this awful and terrible explosion left us with scares both in our heart and mind. Physicians did not have a chance to process what happened. There is work to be done and patient's to take care of. Neglecting the way our souls hurt, we continued our oath disregarding our traumatization. We are mentally and psychologically damaged forever. I lost my focus as I was still in shock. How am I to continue when I need to be fixed?

The dilemma persists, is it actually worth it? I think us all as medical practitioners had a turning point in our life. Well, it will take a huge amount of passion and determination to overcome all what comes in our path as medical students and physicians. If you're willing to engage into this battle, you better put your armor on and charge with all your might.

So, what do you want to be when you grow up?

Conflict of Interest

Both authors declare no conflict of interest.

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