

Intuition is everything

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Intuition is everything. This was solidified for me in my third year of residency when I did the craziest thing I have ever done in my life: I saved a life. I mean I *really* saved a life. If I hadn't been there, she'd be dead.

As a first-generation physician, most of my exposure to medicine prior to entering the field was through television. I must admit, I was surprised by how rarely doctors are making life-or-death, split-second decisions based on the exaggerated dramas I used to watch on the screen. But then it happened to me.

A code was called on the ward that I was on, so I went over to see if it was my patient. It was not, but I was suddenly the only physician in a room with a post-thyroidectomy patient who was purple in the face with a bulging hematoma. I was faced with a decision: to cut or not to cut. And I went for it.

ICU arrived shortly thereafter and was putting pads on the patient for a heart rate that had dropped to 20 as I decompressed the hematoma and saved her heart from stopping. Like I'd seen on TV... it was dramatic. And she lived! I felt both traumatized and accomplished.

But what I learned from that moment was completely unexpected. When it came down to a high-pressure, life-or-death situation, it wasn't science or evidence that helped me; it was my intuition. My widened pupils, churning gut, and breaking heart told me everything I needed to know: that even though I was completely unqualified and risking my job and license to cut this lady's neck, if I didn't, she would die. And if I did, she at least had a shot.

Medicine is so human — that's why I love it. Though our minds are helpful, our hearts are our greatest tool. As humans, as long as we are willing to listen to our inner wisdom, we *know* the right thing

to do. I think Western medicine overvalues the mind sometimes. And because of that, we can talk ourselves out of the right thing to do. We feel comforted by a body of evidence guiding our choices, even when it doesn't feel right. We can prioritize protecting ourselves legally over doing the best thing for the patient. How did we get here?

After the incident, a lot of people looked at me in awe. Many wondered how I could do it, thinking and even voicing that they felt they would not have been able to. These are the same people who, for the most part, I see struggle between what their heart and their mind tell them; who are caught in the middle of the biggest paradox in medicine without even knowing it — the requirement to think through evidence, but the draw to act on intuition.

How do we solve this? We acknowledge the value of inner wisdom. We acknowledge that the things we know because of a force deep within us are just as valuable as the things we know through scientific inquiry. We honor the wisdom of the body that has been passed down through our ancestors and evolution. So, we can pick up the knife when we should. Even when the papers don't have anything to say about it. Even when we least expect it.

To do this comes at a cost. We must allow ourselves to let go of our current ideas of the value of knowledge and human experience. We must allow ourselves to let go of our current system that causes physicians and surgeons to burn out and become numb to our own humanity. We must give up our Western privilege and honor cultures that have known the things we hope to incorporate into medicine for decades. We must allow ourselves to grieve all of these things.

We must honor and learn from Indigenous medicine and traditional Chinese medicine, among others. We must let go of our idea of superiority and be vulnerable in exchanging knowledge. We must acknowledge our own humanity and fragility so that we can tap into it to feel the needs of our surroundings.

Will we rise to the challenge?

In an attempt to lead by example, I wish to share this vulnerable piece of poetry with you. I wrote *Hero* the night I performed the bedside neck dissection.

Hero

If I am such a hero
Why cry in the bath at night?
Drowning in a pool of praise
My tears are out of sight

Code blue in the face
Blue in the neck
I spring into action
Begging to see red
Red on my knife
Red on her lips
Red from the neck
Splashing on the bed

You saved her life!
At least that's what they say
I should be proud
But I want it all to go away

Do something - fast!
Can't you see she's not breathing?
He exclaimed in neutral tone
The pain underneath seething

Air stolen from a loved one's face
Asking, will they live or die?
Watching the team race
Adrenaline-filled experts at their side

My dad survived too
But it changed me forever
Knowing time almost ran out
It was scary, but made me better

A better daughter, better doctor
Staring into the sun
Counting my blessings every moment
Getting paid to create some

Yet this knowing drives me crazy
Spending so much time at work
Giving up my moments
Knowing damn well what they're worth

Why do we all do this?
Suffer and sacrifice all the same
I can tell you it's not worth it
For a brief glimpse of fame

It's 9 o'clock, I wanna scream
I round at 6 am tomorrow
But I take a pill and pray for rest
Ignoring all my sorrow

Sleep, a precious gift
I can finally escape
But my dreams are often haunted
By what happens when we're awake

Beep. Beep. Beeeep.
Another code.