

A letter to an intern

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A new intern

Driving to work one morning recently I stopped at a pedestrian crossing and watched you cross the road. You're a new intern on day 2 in the job. I noticed your dark hair was immaculately done, your fresh curls bouncing in the sun. Your head was held high and there was a confident, proud spring in your step that mirrored the bounce of your curled hair as you walked towards the doors of the hospital.

How do I know you are an intern?

Not because you look young and not because you had a stethoscope draped around your neck (because you didn't). But because I felt that way on my second day on the job. Positive. Bouncy. This is such an exciting time for you, and I can tell that you have so much to give. All that fresh energy, confidence, and pride to go to work. To serve the community that trained you. I hope you continue to feel that way long into your career.

The importance of kindness in the workplace

I have been thinking a lot recently about the importance of kindness after coming across a quote on Twitter by the late Professor C. Gordon that really resonated with me.

“We're all smart. Distinguish yourself by being kind.”

Our [acts of kindness](#) are cumulative. They not only benefit those who we are kind to but serve to remind others to be kind themselves. As I write this letter to you, I reflect on instances where my colleagues were kind to me. Those individuals became my role models. They helped me decide what sort of doctor I wanted to be. I will share two anecdotes of kindness in my workplace with you, in the hope that they inspire you too.

My first experience of kindness as a new intern

The first time I vividly recall experiencing kindness at work I was an intern rotating through a peripheral emergency department. It was a busy 'Code White' day and I remember feeling pressure to move patients through the department quickly. So, I picked up a patient in their 40s who had presented with fever and right upper quadrant pain. The presentation was not clear-cut and my initial history, examination, and investigations had not pointed to a specific diagnosis. However, the patient was unwell enough to need admission.

I discussed the case with the emergency consultant in charge who agreed. Our conundrum then became which team to refer the patient to for admission. Together the consultant and I picked a specialty team. So, I called the switchboard and asked to be

put through to the on-call registrar. When I reached the registrar, she patiently listened to my 'ISBAR' and paused for a moment. She then told me that she didn't think the patient was appropriate for admission under her team. I remember inhaling sharply, bracing myself for the all too familiar push-back. The advice to call another team. The sense of frustration that comes with trying to find an appropriate in-patient home for a sick emergency department patient who doesn't quite fit a specific clinical mold.

The kind registrar

What happened next was a breath of fresh air. The registrar informed me that she would have a 'Reg-to-Reg' discussion with an alternative team or teams. And she would call back to let me know who had accepted. It would be easier for her she gently told me - not her first time at this rodeo. She thanked me for my referral, complimented my 'ISBAR' and hung up. I remember being stunned. Six months into my internship and this had never happened. What a pleasant experience. I put down the phone and wandered out to the waiting room to pick up my next patient.

Feeling overwhelmed on the ward as a new intern

The next time was a Saturday later that year during my [surgical term](#). I had already worked 60 stressful hours that week and was dreading the 14-hour shift ahead of me. I started the day with a solo 30 patient ward round for my home team. By early afternoon I had finished my ward round and written out the blood forms for my 12, day one post-operative patients. I quickly checked the surgical electronic task board and immediately felt nauseous. Because the list of jobs was already long and there were several hours until the second cover intern arrived. I scurried out to the nurses' station to ask for help taking some of the bloods. No phlebotomists on a Saturday.

The power of colleagues working together

To my great relief, for the second time in my short career, my colleagues responded with kindness. I found myself surrounded by nursing staff who sensed that I was overwhelmed with work and needed their help. They recognised that it was in the patients' best interests for us to work together. One by one they took blood forms until there were none left. The shift manager made me a cup of tea and found me a stale scotch finger biscuit. She then shooed me off the ward to attend to my other jobs.

A week later and I see you again. This time in the hospital coffee shop. You are sitting amongst a gaggle of doctors at a large table, I presume post-ward round. Next to you is a third-year medical student I recognise, it's his very first week on the wards. He looks a little apprehensive and is clutching a clipboard filled with guidelines and checklists. I remember that feeling too. I scan your face, searching for that Day 2 smile. It's still there. Good.

As I collect my coffee order and walk towards the exit I overhear the medical student thank one of the more senior doctors for his coffee and state emphatically "The next one is on me." I pause at the sugar station, my back to the table of doctors and hold my breath. To my delight, the senior doctor replies "Oh no, the medical student never buys

the coffee!” I breathe a sigh of relief, all appears to be well in that team. I walk back to my office, a coffee in my hand and a huge smile now on my face.

Be a role model for kindness

When times are tough dear intern, I implore you to grab onto little glimmers of kindness. Think back to moments when your colleagues have made your life in the hospital more pleasant. Harness this and be the change you want to see in the system. The true silver lining is, it’s not actually that difficult. Sometimes the smallest acts of kindness can heal the worst days. All it takes is a considerate phone call, a shared coffee, chipping in when we see others struggling with a heavy load, a stale scotch-finger or a smile.

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