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How We Do It: Reflections on Surgical Internship

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Abstract

In this reflective essay, Dr. Matthew Orringer explores the question not of why one pursues medicine, but how one endures the rigors of medical training—particularly the surgical internship year. While acknowledging that other professions may be more difficult, he emphasizes the unique challenges of intern year and the invaluable lessons it imparts in patient care, communication, and endurance. Central to his reflection is the idea that survival and growth in medicine are deeply tied to the camaraderie and mutual support among peers. Drawing parallels to his past experience as a collegiate swimmer, Orringer highlights how shared struggle fosters strong bonds. Whether navigating overwhelming trauma consults or long pre-dawn ICU shifts, he found strength in the presence and perseverance of fellow interns. Ultimately, he concludes that the answer to “How medicine?” lies in collective resilience.

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How We Do It

During the journey toward becoming a physician, one will inevitably answer the age-old query, “Why medicine?” This is an important question that allows the inquirer to gain insight into the motivations, perspectives, and dreams of a prospective doctor. However, a question less often pondered is: “How medicine?” That is, how does one survive the rigorous process of becoming a well-trained doctor?

The impending conclusion of my internship has led me to reflect on this thought-provoking, albeit grammatically improper, question. I will preface my comments by saying that there are many jobs that I believe to be more challenging than that of a surgical intern. However, intern year does present unique challenges and is a worthy rite of passage for doctors. As such, there

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are innumerable lessons regarding patient care, communication, and time management that I have learned this during this transformative year. There is one lesson, however, that I believe may be more universally shared among interns than any other. And that wisdom is that the *how* in “*How medicine?*” is intrinsically woven into the bonds and friendships that we forge with our peers through the struggles and triumphs that we encounter along the way.

I frequently think back to my time as a collegiate swimmer. Walking to the pool early in the morning through the New England winter for my first practice of the day certainly built mental fortitude. And yet so many of my fondest college memories are from laughing with my teammates between swim repeats or encouraging one another in the weightroom on those very same early mornings. In much the same vein, I am struck by how so many of my most cherished memories from this past year came alongside my co-residents during challenging times.

We spend one month helping the on-call resident see patients in the emergency department at our trauma center. It can be overwhelming as the consults accumulate, but I found that the most powerful way to get through these instances was always by way of a joke to lighten the mood or a word of encouragement that we would get the work done. When I see the residents with whom I worked that month, we still laugh about our hardest nights and wonder how we managed to persevere through them. Similarly, I met some of my closest friends during an arduous month in the intensive care unit. Like the strength of one’s character, the strength of bonds between peers are fortified under pressure.

Every morning, long before the sun rises, one can find a congregation of interns, furiously typing and frantically jotting down lab values to get ready for rounds. On many of these mornings, I drove to the hospital wondering how I was able to do this day after day but knowing that so many of my peers would be at the hospital next to me doing the same work provided me with a sense of hope: If they could do it, I could do it. In this way, medical training creates a reciprocal feedback loop in which you are both supporting and being supported by those around you all the time. The *how* is often simply “I can because they are” and vice versa.

When challenges arise during residency and in my career, I will think back to the moments of struggle that I have already encountered and try my best to revel in the shared experiences that I am lucky enough to have with my peers. In the hardest moments, the bonds that I share with those around me will push me forward and help to answer, “*How Medicine?*”