

Letters

To a Clerkship Student



From the Class of 2026
School of Medicine

LETTERS TO A CLERKSHIP STUDENT

FROM THE CLASS OF 2026
SCHOOL OF MEDICINE

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FOREWORD

"One of the essential qualities of the clinician is his interest in humanity, for the secret of the care of the patient is in caring for the patient."

—Francis Peabody MD

Congratulations! You've made it through your first year of medical school: through the anatomy, through the physiology, through the pharmacology, through the biochemistry, through the organ systems; through it all. You've practiced interviews, physical exams, oral presentations and write-ups. You're ready for the next thing and likely a bit nervous about what will happen next. That's appropriate. We too were nervous at this point in training. We in the clinical world are waiting for you and can't wait to greet you in the clinical spaces in which you will undergo the next part of the journey. Your upper-class colleagues have prepared some reflections to help you with the transition. It is often helpful to have some advice from those who have gone before. Read them; some will resonate now, and some will make more sense later, but all are thoughtful and well written.

So, what advice can I offer you as you embark on the journey that I began more than four decades ago in another time and another city? Let me try a few thoughts.

- 1) Listen to the patient: I love stories; they help me understand what is going on in the world and what the storyteller thinks is going on in the world. I hope you love them as well. Every patient has a story worth hearing. Sometimes, it will make sense to us from a biomedical perspective. Often, it will remind you that the world doesn't always make sense. More often, it will touch your heart. Always, stories will be the key to understanding what is going on with your patient.
- 2) Relationships make practice worthwhile: The practice of medicine is grounded in science but comes alive in relationships. In my years of practice, I've gotten to know thousands of children and families and treated a wide variety of conditions. It is the relationships that have always sustained me, professionally and emotionally. Relationships allow you to judge the meaning of the narrative that your patient is sharing and to facilitate your ability to explain your thinking to your patient. Savor those relationships.
- 3) Be open to change: When I entered the clinical world, AIDS was an as-yet-unnamed syndrome and verapamil was an experimental drug. Now HIV is a chronic disease, and verapamil is a legacy medication. We spent decades teaching new parents to always put babies to sleep on their bellies, but we never made a dent in the Sudden Unexplained Infant Death problem until we changed that to "Back-to-Sleep." You all are studying and internalizing the current state of medicine. I can promise you that much of what we are teaching you now will be superseded by new understandings in ten years (and some of it will change over the course of the next year). Roll with it, embrace it, and enjoy the way in which our understanding of the human condition evolves.
- 4) Context matters: Humans are social creatures and the social context in which they live impacts their health and your ability to improve their health. As physicians, we have a unique perspective on that relationship. We should bring that perspective to our patients, to our communities, and to society writ large. One can't do that for everything, but every physician should be doing that for some things. A mentor of mine would quote the Tikkun Olam from his reading of the Jewish scriptures: *"It is not your obligation to complete the task of perfecting the world, but neither are you free to stop from doing all you can."* That thought has resonated with me over the course of my career. So, every now and then, consider the question: What system changes are needed to make it easier for us to take

care of patients like this, and what can I do to make that happen? Your career will be the richer for it.

Does this mean that you shouldn't also strive for balance? How do you find that sweet spot in your caring that allows you to maintain your equilibrium as you perform what currently seems to be impossible tasks efficiently and effectively? We all find our balance in different ways. Over the years, I've found that embracing stories and relationships while marveling at the evolution of our science and working to improve our systems have allowed me to maintain that equilibrium. I hope that they help you as well on your journey. Good luck. See you on the other side.

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Professor |University of Colorado, School of Medicine
Vice Chair, Clinical Strategy & Transformation| Department of Pediatrics

*In Pediatrics, that means I am in my 43rd year of Pediatric training. It really does take a lifetime.

INTRODUCTION

This publication was inspired by the work of Czechoslovakian poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, who wrote a series of letters to an aspiring writer in the book, *Letters to a Young Poet*. This volume generated a series of other works to those beginning careers in various fields and is titled, *The Art of Mentoring*. The collection spans a diverse number of professions and includes such titles as *Letters to a Young Jazz Musician* by Wynton Marsalis, *Letters to a Young Lawyer* by Alan Dershowitz, and *Treatment Kind and Fair: Letters to a Young Doctor* by Dr. Perri Klass. Inspired by these works, Dr. Tess Jones encouraged senior medical students to write letters of advice to their younger peers as they embarked on their clinical year—considered the most challenging phase during medical school training. She desired students to grasp the relevance of Rilke’s work and asked the rising clinical students to consider certain ideas:

Rilke wrote about taking risks not only to succeed but also to fail: “Always trust yourself and your own feeling; if it turns out that you were wrong, then the natural growth of your inner life will eventually guide you to other insights.”

He wrote about being impatient to know everything but being comfortable with knowing nothing: “Try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language.”

And he wrote about being aware of yourself in the world but being cautious about taking yourself too seriously: “Don’t be too quick to draw conclusions from what happens to you: simply let it happen.”

Rilke encourages that very first reader to experience and express all that is happening around him, to him, and because of him: “Turn to what your everyday life affords; depict your sorrows and desires, your passing thoughts and beliefs in some kind of beauty. Depict all that with heartfelt, quiet, humble sincerity.”

Letters to a Clerkship Student is a collection of creative works by students from the Class of 2026. The publication contains practical advice, tragic stories, inspirational words, and humorous ideas. Within this collection, you will discover a source of guidance and a resource to help partners, family and friends gain understanding of the intense experiences during the clinical year. We hope to read your letters in a future edition! Wishing you joy and fulfillment on your path!

Anjali Dhurandhar, MD
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FOREWORD FROM THE GOLD HUMANISM HONOR SOCIETY

Congratulations on starting one of the most meaningful and transformative chapters of your journey in medicine! As you step out of the cadaver lab and the classrooms of Education 1 and into the halls of the hospital and rooms of the clinic, you might be feeling a flurry of emotions. Fear, intimidation, excitement, pride, a sense of finally fulfilling your purpose, a healthy dose of imposter syndrome. No matter what you are feeling, know that it is normal and okay to feel.

This next year will be one of immense growth. There will be moments that will make everything feel worth it: when you answer that pimp question correctly, when you gingerly carry a newborn to the warmer in the OR, when a patient calls you "doctor" for the first time. And there will be moments that make you question everything: when you bomb a UWorld question set, when a patient yells at you, when you feel like you just can't get anything right. We hope that as you flip through the letters in this collection, you realize that you are not alone.

We encourage you to live presently. Focus on the learning and let go of the grades and expectations. Use each moment as an opportunity to enhance your medical knowledge. You are here to learn, grow, and improve your doctoring skills. By being present with your patients and yourself, you will optimize your clinical year and leave feeling like you have truly learned what it means to be an excellent doctor. We are so proud of you and know you will achieve all your goals and dreams.

Sofie Rosenberg and Anima Shrestha
On behalf of the Gold Humanism Honor Society, Class of 2025

Dear Clerkship Student,

Congratulations on entering clerkship year. Personally, I found MS1 year really difficult, and LIC year (while also challenging) reminded me why I chose to go to medical school. This year, you will get to actually contribute to the care of patients, learn from them and from your preceptors, be in the operating room, deliver a baby, and so much more. The human connections you will form this year can help carry you through the challenging times.

The first few weeks (or months) of clerkship year will be overwhelming. You will be simultaneously trying to figure out how to talk to a real patient, to remember physical exam steps, to write a note, to avoid contaminating anything in the operating room, and even how to find the hospital bathroom. Ask for help when needed. It will get easier with time.

You will probably feel dumb at some point; there is no avoiding it. For example, you may be asked to identify a muscle in the operating room and call it a “platypus” muscle instead of a platysma muscle in front of the entire team. Be kind to yourself and remember that the residents and attendings you look up to were once in your shoes as well. There is much more time to learn everything that it takes to be a physician. Learn from your mistakes and try to be just a little bit better each day.

Cherish the time that you have with patients. As medical students, we have the luxury of much more time with the patients we follow compared to residents and attendings. Get to know your patients; they will help teach you in their own ways. Listen to them and learn their stories. You will form powerful connections with them. You will have the opportunity to advocate for them on your team based on the knowledge you gain by getting to know them, their stories, and their values.

If you are lucky, over the course of the year, your mindset will change from thinking of patients as “my preceptors’ patients” to “my patients” (obviously with lots of oversight from preceptors!) as you get to know your patients and take more ownership in their care. That change in mindset can help you learn well and increase your engagement in clinical spaces.

There will be difficult moments. I do not think it is possible to fully prepare for them. You might be on your second week in the hospital ever, pre-rounding on a patient with advanced cancer. They may turn to you as you are alone with them in their room, stirring their coffee for them, and ask “if I were your favorite uncle, what would you tell me to do? Should I transition to hospice care?” You may be the first person to whom a patient discloses a sexual assault or other trauma. You may have a patient pass away. Take a deep breath, be empathic to those around you, and ask your preceptors for advice, support, and debriefs.

Remember to take care of yourself, too; this allows you to fully show up, learn well, and be a functional member of a healthcare team. Continue the activities in life that bring you joy and carve out time in your schedule for them. Stay in contact with your family and friends outside of medicine and lean on your med school friends too; they understand better than anyone what you are going through.

And last—remember to say thanks. Express gratitude to the patients, preceptors, APPs, nurses, techs, and everyone else who takes the time out of their day to teach you something, help you find your way when you end up hopelessly lost in the hospital, or cheer you on. The sheer magnitude of information that you will learn over the next year is impressive. There are a lot of people who are going to help you on your way in that journey.

Try to enjoy every moment. You’ve got this.

Katie Plummer

Clerkship: An Epic Year

In hospital halls, so bright and grand,
Stethoscope in trembling hand,
I fumble through the Epic chart,
Unsure of where to even start.

Through winding halls and endless turns,
I find the room for which I yearn,
I press the pump, sanitizer flows,
I say a prayer, then in I goes.

"I am Student Doctor __," I start to say,
Open-ended questions coming into play,
"Do I have permission to palpate your spine,"
"Repeat after me, "99, 99, 99."

H&P, physical exam done,
My preceptor awaits, it's time to run,
I gather my thoughts for the summary statement,
Crafting each line with careful arrangement.

But when I open my mouth to speak,
My nerves rise up and reach their peak,
And so, I cringe as I recall,
Mixing kidneys up with gall.

Tears well up, cheeks flush red,
That moment, rent free in my head,
But the silver lining is, you see,
"Much improved" my eval will be.

Though the grind can be weary and tough,
And loans can feel like burdensome stuff,
I know it is worth it when patients say,
"You will make an incredible doctor someday."

And so, my advice to you,
Clerkship student, so bright and new,
Is to do your best and don't lose hope,
Even if you feel like a giant dope.

We've all been there, feeling unsure,
But we made it through, and you'll endure.
Stay determined, take it slow,
You're stronger than you even know.

Enjoy the ride, learn a lot,
You worked so hard to be in this spot,

Imposter syndrome hits us all, it's true,
So fake it till you make it, and trust in you.

Rely on your peers for guidance and support,
Laugh at your mistakes and be a good sport,
Though the road may be long, and the struggle is real,
In the end, it's the "MD" that seals the deal.

Oh, and some last pieces of advice before I forget,
No need to meal prep, so don't you fret,
In the doctors' lounge, make sure to swing by,
At least three times a day, to fuel up and keep morale high.

And lastly, no need to do laundry or plan your fits,
Though not the most flattering, scrubs are legit,
And while they may say large, medium, or small,
The sizing is nonsense, so find some you like and hold on to them all.

Don't forget to breathe, smile, and give yourself a pat,
There is a reason you're here, it's not luck, imagine that,
Congrats on your journey so far,
I am here if you need me, my door is always ajar.

Melissa Adler

Dear LIC student,

It is easy to forget that only a couple of years ago you were waiting with bated breath to hear if you would get an interview, if you would get into school. Only a couple of years ago you were facing so much unknown. I often forgot to take a step back to look around at all of the things I now know and to recognize there was a time when I could only dream about being where I am now, especially when the days are long or you make a mistake, or you just need to sleep.

So, take moments to appreciate it because this year is going to be hard (and if any of your classmates say it isn't, they're lying). But here's a secret: *No one expects you to know how to do things yet*. You are supposed to be asking questions, and going slow, and making some mistakes. Your only job this year is to learn! Enjoy the time you get to deep dive on a patient or sit with a family. Don't get wrapped up in trying so hard to be useful because, once again, *no one expects you to know how to do things yet*.

Write down the things that stick, good and bad; they both have value. Write down the things you learn that make you laugh.

It is a privilege and an honor to be a part of someone's worst day. You will become so attached to your cohort patients that when they have a complication it will hurt. A lot. But it makes the best days all the more sweet; don't forget to reflect on those too.

It's okay to feel like you did a good job. In fact, also write down the things that make you feel pride.

We talk a lot about making sure we take care of ourselves (which is important!), but the reality is there will be times when you don't or don't feel like you can. In those moments give yourself some grace, it's okay if this isn't always a time of balance.

A couple of more actionable pieces of advice:

- You will constantly be asked what you want to work on that day; always have an answer ready in your back pocket.
- Find out what kind of music the surgeon likes in the OR; it is an easy way to get some bonus points (or improve their mood).

"Don't be weary with the miles to be rode or the trails to be forged but rather take heart: Be full of grit and don't forget, you were made to do hard things that require a whole lot."

—Unknown

You're gonna do great!

Mackenzie Davis

Dear Clerkship Student,

During my clinical year, I often found myself so focused on the desire for knowledge, the drive for excellence, and the expectation to perform that I forgot how to simply be human. I remember hesitating to navigate everyday interactions, like where to set my bag or when to eat a snack. I felt discouraged when sleepless nights, diligent studying, and intentionality seemed to go unnoticed. And I worried about evaluations, where feedback from others could either inspire confidence or feel disheartening.

The experience can be isolating. Yet, every person who has ever become a doctor has faced struggles of some kind. And you, like each of them, will move forward and grow from this year.

Here is the advice I wish I had during those challenging moments:

- **Stay grounded outside of medicine.** This journey is a marathon with many milestones. Each one is significant and rewarding, yet they all lead to the next. While the path can feel daunting, it's also full of beautiful moments amidst the hard times. But it's too long a journey to neglect the one person walking it—you. Take care of yourself and honor your humanity. Don't deny yourself basic needs: eat, call a loved one, take a walk, stretch, look at the mountains, or even have a good cry. These small actions will sustain you in the long run, even if they're easy to overlook when you're busy.
- **Remember that you belong here.** It's easy to feel out of place during this learning journey but remember that you are exactly where you are meant to be. Whether it's putting down your bag or asking for help setting up your EPIC lists, you have a rightful place in this environment and seeking orientation is important. Timing and professionalism are key, but don't forget that your presence is valuable and expected.
- **Keep a record of your experiences.** Create a system to document your journey—an Excel sheet, a journal, or a note on your phone. Write down specific tasks you performed during clinicals, questions you answered correctly, or new concepts you learned. This record will be invaluable when it comes time for evaluations. It's a gift to your preceptors, who may not remember all the details of your contributions, and a gift to yourself, ensuring your hard work is accurately represented.

You've chosen a challenging yet rewarding path, and this year is just one step along the way. Trust yourself, care for yourself, and know that you are capable of achieving great things.

Best wishes,
Nicole McCaw

Dear Clerkship Student,

It's okay to feel.

During my fourth week of IM Immersion, Gerald, a gentleman in his late 70s, joined our service. Gerald had a thick snow-white beard, frazzled gray hair, and a clear plastic eye patch taped haphazardly to his forehead. He had been admitted after an emergent repair of a ruptured globe following a fall at home, and further complicated by a positive COVID test after he couldn't wean off oxygen in the PACU.

Early Monday morning, I donned my PPE and entered his room. Gerald was sitting up in his bed, disheveled but comfortable. After discussing his night, I explained the plan for the day: clearance from ophthalmology, weaning oxygen, and physical therapy. He was agreeable but had questions. Thus, I pulled up a chair to his bedside.

"When will this eye patch come off? How long will I be here? When can I go home? Do we know why I fell? Have you talked to my daughter-in-law? Do I need to see ophthalmology again? Can you make the appointment for me?"

I answered what I could and promised to follow up on the rest. He'd likely stay a few more days, and his patch would come off at his ophthalmology follow-up, which he'd need to schedule with Kaiser due to his insurance coverage. I visited Gerald later that afternoon and to my surprise, he asked the same questions that afternoon. The next morning, he repeated them again. By the third day, this pattern hadn't changed.

I began to feel frustrated. I believe I would have been much more empathetic to a patient who was confused or forgetful. But he was fully oriented and passed all cognitive evaluations. The source of my frustration was rooted in one particular question: "Can you schedule my follow-up appointment for me?" Each time, I explained that due to his Kaiser insurance, he would have to do it himself. Still, he persisted: "But can't you just make it for me?"

It's okay to feel. But you can't stop there. After leaving his room on Wednesday, I reflected: why was I so annoyed? I pride myself on being patient and compassionate. But Gerald's repeated questions clashed with my expectations. I struggled with patients who didn't seem to take responsibility for their care, and Gerald seemed to fit that mold.

The next morning, I entered his room with a new goal: to understand him better. After the usual questions about his night, I pivoted. "So, how long have you lived in your hometown?" I asked, knowing he was a long-time resident. This sparked a conversation about his 50 years in the city and how it had transformed from the "Wild West" to a "hippy town" and now to a community of affluence.

Soon, the conversation turned more personal. Gerald revealed that he had lost his wife just three weeks earlier. They had been married for over 50 years, and he was struggling to adjust to life without her. He hadn't been taking care of himself, and he suspected that's why he fell. He missed his dog, his neighbors, and the life he once knew.

Our conversation transformed my perspective. I understood why Gerald kept asking for help with his appointment. He had spent most of his life with a partner who likely supported him in these tasks. Now, he was alone, navigating unfamiliar territory. My annoyance melted into compassion.

When Gerald asked again about scheduling his follow-up, I reassured him I'd do my best. I reached out to his daughter-in-law, Carol, his medical power of attorney. During our conversation, I expressed my condolences and discussed Gerald's situation. She shared similar concerns about his ability to care for himself since his wife's passing. Together, we began coordinating his follow-up care.

In the final days of his stay, I called Carol daily with updates, and we worked on contacting Kaiser to schedule his ophthalmology appointment. Gerald seemed more at ease, knowing he had support.

My experience with Gerald reminded me of a valuable lesson: approach patients with curiosity, not judgment. At first, I had viewed him as someone who didn't care for himself, but his story revealed layers of loss and grief. Taking the time to listen deepened my understanding of his struggles and fostered a stronger therapeutic relationship. Gerald's case reaffirmed that every patient's story is unique and deserving of thoughtful consideration. Curiosity can uncover truths that judgment obscures, allowing us to provide care that is not only effective but also compassionate.

So, Clerkship Student, when you're deep into your LIC year, sleep-deprived and weary from driving across Denver to countless clinics, I encourage you to pause and take a breath. Allow yourself to feel. Our emotions are a powerful tool for self-awareness and personal growth. Use them to gain deeper insight into your patients' lives, as this understanding can create a lasting impact on the care you provide.

Best,
Brendan King

Identifying information has been changed/removed for patient privacy.

Dear Incoming Clerkship Student,

Trust the process.

This phrase seems to be thrown around almost daily after the preclinical year and is used almost exclusively in situations where it's the last thing you wanted to hear. But I'm here to add one more voice to the echo.

Every day of clerkships will present you with the real-world manifestations of the ailments and afflictions that you read about last year. Some days you'll surprise yourself (and your team) with how much you remember about bullous pemphigoid, as you craft a differential diagnosis on the spot during rounds. Other days, you'll swear that you must have missed the lecture where they discussed heart failure or wonder how the kidneys ever made sense. But that's okay; the instances where you stumble or feel completely lost are the exact moments that help you learn and remember.

Additionally, you will find that the pathophysiology is often the least complex part of the picture. One of my patients comes to mind: a gentleman with peripheral artery disease who developed diffuse arterial thrombosis in his legs after the backpack containing his anticoagulant was stolen from the homeless shelter. The treatment is straightforward, but the underlying social issues will confound any plan you put forth.

Don't forget along the way that medicine is as much of an art as it is a science. As devastating as it might feel to get every single question wrong during that five-hour surgery, your knowledge is often the least important thing. Few, if any, preceptors will note how impressed they were with your knowledge. The aspects that people—most of all your patients—will remember is how you listened, cared, and worked with the team. Ultimately, the medical students who impress residents and attendings the most are the ones who find ways to be helpful without being in the way. Be a person whom the team would be proud to call a colleague in the future.

A few highs and lows from this year:

- On week one of outpatient pediatrics, my preceptor asked me what was on my differential diagnosis for a child with pink eyes. "Pink eye" did not make my list.
- On Labor and Delivery, I had the opportunity to do two hand-over-hand deliveries. The first baby I delivered had the same name as my brother.
- I had the chance to follow one of my cohort patients, a lovely woman I met in urogynecology clinic, through her initial consult, pre-op appointment, surgery, and post-op appointments. At the end of her last post-op, she hugged me, told me that she was so glad I was part of her care team, and said that I was going to be an excellent physician.
- On pediatrics I took care of a kid with Staph Scalded Skin Syndrome. Since his dad couldn't be there until later in the day, I got to sit down with him to explain the diagnosis and plan. It was such a simple moment but was the first time that I walked out of the room feeling like I was truly progressing on my journey to become a physician.
- On surgery, I was asked to spend a day as the bedside assistant for several robotic surgeries with the gynecology service. With a little coaching, I learned how to change the arms on the DaVinci, pass things through the port, and suction to keep the surgical field clear. Another attending came

by to assist after finishing his cases and was promptly sent away because I was “nailing it.” After the case, the attending REQUESTED that I send her an eval to fill out.

- One of my favorite patients on my IM immersion, who had horrible complications during a procedure at an outside hospital, was finally discharged after four weeks in the hospital. He was unexpectedly readmitted a week later with bacteremia and passed away during my last week on the immersion. As devastating as this was for our team, we got to participate in his Final Salute (a special ceremony for veterans who die in the hospital), paying respect alongside the entire healthcare team and his family.
- The most consistent feedback that I have received this year is that I connect well with patients, and that they and their families appreciate having me on the team. As much as I want to be a skillful and knowledgeable physician, I can’t help but feel that this is at least as important to the patients whom I help treat.

Somehow, the best and worst are yet to come. You will work harder, and sleep less. You will give 110% effort, only to receive evaluations that say they are surprised you know how to tie your shoes. But you will also look back and realize that you have grown more in one short year than you could have possibly imagined. You are on your way to becoming an incredible physician. Trust the process.

Best of Luck,
Brandon Abell

John Doe
Approx. 15 y/o.

Scrapes on his cheeks
where he once smiled.

Breaks in his bones
where he once ran.

Blood in his lungs
where he once breathed.

Exposed muscle
where his mother once stroked.

I hold his hand as his eyes glaze over,
rough callus on soft youth.

I imagine his mother, lost.
I imagine his sister, aching.

I struggle to keep the tears from my cheeks
as he struggles to meet God.

I ask that God for help.
I ask that God for a solution.

I ask that God for his comfort.
I ask that God for his name.

Just a boy, alone,
without a name for us to whisper.

I cannot heal his wounds,
for that is the job of his body, and soul.

I cannot stop his pain,
for it is greater than my medicine.

But I can be here, next to him.
to care, and to provide comfort.

I wrote this poem during my clerkship year after one of my Emergency Medicine shifts, where I saw my first pediatric casualty case. I remember feeling so helpless, so lacking in knowledge and feeling ungrounded. Everyone else in the department seemed to have a switch that they could flip that allowed them to continue on, and usually I did too, but not that day. That day, all I could do was physically exist in the same room as my patient. And from this poem, comes the thesis statement of this "Letter to a Clerkship Student": You have the time. You are gifted with the time to be there for your patient, to talk to them, to hold their hand, to explain their condition. You are there to learn medicine, of course, but

you are also there to gain fluency in humanity. You are an adjunct to a team that functions fully well in your absence, keep this in mind. You have the time to step away, you have the freedom of not being the attending or resident or "first-call" in Epic. You have the freedom from piles of notes to be completed, orders to be written, patients to be seen, and bureaucracy to handle. You have the freedom to know and care for your patient, and to hurt with them or to find joy with them. This freedom is one of the best things you can know about clerkship year. Because if you practice it now, you will carry it with you for the rest of your career.

Jess Oudakker

Dear Clerkship Students,

I know how you're feeling. Clerkship year is about to start, and your mind is moving a million miles a minute. Will my preceptors like me? Will my first oral presentation be too short, or go on for minutes too long? Will my management plan for this complex patient accurately portray the multitude of treatments they require? Right now, the finish line feels far away. It seems like there is still an infinite number of diagnoses and management scripts to learn. It is no doubt that while clerkship year can be incredibly overwhelming and challenging, it is also incredibly rewarding. It is at times like these I like to bring up my favorite quote from no other than my favorite movie, Ferris Bueller's Day Off: "Life moves pretty fast. If you don't stop and look around once in a while, you could miss it."

While it is incredibly easy to get lost in the details of the day-to-day challenges or focus on grades and evaluations during clerkship year, I encourage you instead, to focus on the patients. Take a second before the hustle and bustle of LIC year starts and look back at your personal statement. Think back to why you decided to start the long process of becoming a physician. Undoubtedly, you care about people. You want to help patients through their hardest times, and you want to become a healer. This is the year that the journey truly begins for you. One of the greatest privileges of working in healthcare is connecting with patients. Patients put undeniable trust in you and share with you their greatest vulnerabilities. As a medical student, we have more time than residents or attendings to truly be there for our patients. To take an extra 10 minutes to call and update family members, or to sit with patients and learn their unique stories. Although at times you may feel as though you do not have a lot of power in the healthcare system, we have the power to offer genuine support and care to the patients who rely on us.

On my internal medicine rotation, I met 45-year-old women with stage four ovarian metastasis that had spread to her bones and her brain. Although she was going through incredible adversity and pain, she was one of the strongest and most optimistic patients I ever met. Whenever I finished writing notes and was wrapping up for the day, I would go sit with her for 5-10 minutes. We would talk about her children, her favorite trips she took to Mexico, and laugh about how terrible hospital food could truly be. After a week of treating her hypercalcemia and cancer pain, this patient decided to go home to her kids, discharging with hospice. When she was saying goodbye to me, the patient began to cry and handed me a paper rose she had hand painted for me. She told me how much she appreciated our chats and thanked me for helping to treat her. I remember earlier that day feeling like we had failed her. We could not cure her cancer or give her more time with her kids. However, simply sitting with her, listening, meant more to her than I knew. This experience is one from clerkship that I will remember forever. The evaluations, the little mistakes I made in my oral presentations, are things I will forget. However, at the end of the day, the patients' lives you touch are what stays with you.

Although rotations can be challenging, I encourage you to remember that you are here for a reason. You made it through the grueling application process because you are more than capable of becoming an excellent physician and because you care about patients. Take time to look around and reflect, embrace learning each patient's story, and don't forget to congratulate yourself on your incredible growth and resilience throughout the year.

Best,
Luana Gnatenco

To the Nervous Clerkship Student,

Breathe. You got this.

If I could go back and give myself one piece of advice before starting clerkship year it would be this: no one expects you to know all the medical knowledge. Just show up. Have a positive attitude. Be a team player. And learn. That's really all they want from you.

The knowledge will come. You'll embarrass yourself on rounds. Then you'll do it again, and again. But you will learn so much along the way. You'll make mistake after mistake, but you'll also get so much right. One day you'll walk out of clinic and call your parents or partner or best friend and say, "I felt like someone's doctor today."

Find your passion. Find your people. It can be difficult to distinguish the excitement of novelty from the joy of finally figuring out what you want to do for the rest of your life but trust your instincts. And trust those around you when they tell you they've never seen you happier on a certain rotation.

This year will be incredible. You'll deliver a life-changing diagnosis. You'll hold someone's hand while they give birth. You'll break a rib doing CPR. You'll catch a baby. You'll watch someone take their last breath and feel your own breath catch. You'll walk your patient out of her last chemo appointment and share the joy of her remission together.

Embrace it all.

Ask to do more, see more, learn more, and never forget: your compassion is your greatest strength.

Above all, give yourself grace; you'll need it through the highest of highs and the lowest of lows. Stop every once in a while and reflect on how much you've grown because the transformation is truly incredible. And though you may lose sight of it at times as the self-doubt creeps in, remember: You Deserve To Be Here.

Breathe. You got this.

Ananya Shah

~ Five Poems ~

METH

This world was not made for you,
A world so empty and confusing,
You have found a place deep,
deep in the darkness, a world where
No one can touch you
Not your wife, nor your children,
Just a glass pipe and electricity
And electricity ruined you
The world never made sense, did it?
You were born like all of us,
but your world had visions
and reality never settled
Your world has aliens
And signals which blast your skull
Enemies who take no shape
Shadows that set your feet ablaze
How torturous is your world,
Your unseen enemy
And just like us,
you found an escape.

Addiction

This world has not done much for you, it seems
And I too, would seclude myself
As a rock, an oyster, a buried mollusk
Embracing every piece of dirt and earth and poison
That the world convinced me I am

One more case

This feeling I embrace, my lack of rest overwhelms my senses. My consciousness has separated from my emotions. This conglomeration of fried chicken, 4 hours of rest, a green chili breakfast burrito, and 16oz of drip coffee has left my emotions paralyzed and my mind at peace. This specialty brings me to a setting of accomplishment, where every minuscule detail can be perfected and controlled. This deathly race of who will break first, remember it is only an illusion. Call home.

Remember

There will come a day
I lean to your ear
And shout my hellos

There will come a day
God willing
We will take the long way about the stairs

The day will come
When our conversation
Is but the sunshine on our heads

Perhaps the day will come
When the eyes blur
And I am simply a comforting voice

But here we are now
this joyous celebration
Of the life we share

Memories now are but an adjunct to our love
Our glorious assumption, I promise
I will continue caring for you

To My First Sick Patient, "All for You"

I stopped brushing my teeth today.
I wish you would notice.
Instead, you're still there, detaching from our world.
I know we've had our conversations,
but the one you needed most,
how are your kids?
What life used to fill your eyes?
Before you blew into this white room,
chasing the sun, like a moth.

I stopped washing my hair today, just like you had.
I hoped you would notice.
Instead, I see I am too late,
And that brief glimmer of love in your eyes,
Was used somewhere else.
Perhaps to your sister, or someone passing by.
Now you are burnt, burnt and dry.

I stopped exercising today, just like you have.
Maybe you would notice.
I realize that sometimes,
your thoughts are the same as mine, too.
These same questions I ask you every day.
You will never know
How much they mean to me.

Maybe one day we can both feel the sun,
Wash our hair, and go for a run.
I have a feeling I will run alone,
But somehow you will be with me,
Far from here.

Emmanuel Cruz

Dear Clerkship Student,

Welcome to clerkship year! This year will be one of the best, but also some of the hardest times. Here are some tips to consider as you go through the year:

- Give yourself grace. It's okay to make mistakes; that's how you learn. There will be some mistakes that will be hard to let go, and that's okay. But just remember that you're doing a really hard thing, and no one is perfect. This is the time to make those mistakes and learn from them. While you will have more responsibility than you've had thus far, you will also have the biggest safety net during this time with residents and attendings looking out for you. All of us before you have made mistakes, and we still made it! You will too.
- Lean on your friends and your support systems. This year can be lonely, but remember you are not going through it alone. Even if it feels like you're the only one experiencing a hard time, thought, or feeling, there's a really good chance that someone else has experienced it too, so reach out to your people.
- Put yourself out there. The only way to learn is to do things. Know your boundaries, but don't be afraid to try things outside of your comfort zone. Honestly, so much of this year will be uncomfortable with a lot of "first times," but pretty quickly, you will get comfortable with discomfort. So, take advantage of all opportunities that present themselves and try new things!
- Be yourself. Remember, the patients you're treating are humans most of all, and all anyone wants is to connect. Being yourself will allow for that connection to happen. It will improve your patient care to treat those you care for as you would anyone else out in the world.
- This is THE year in your medical career that you'll have the most time in a clinical space, so use it wisely. Spend time with your patients, ask your residents and attendings questions about medicine and about their paths to how they got to where they are. There will be a time in your near future for decision-making about your career. The professionals whom you get to work with this year will have the best advice for when that time comes. Learn from other clinical professionals and take time to try different approaches to things. Be a sponge and absorb as much as you can, and not just the medical knowledge.
- Take time for yourself. A lot is asked of you this year, and you will have to show up for patients when sometimes it feels like you can't even show up for yourself. So, in the free time that you do get, be intentional in how you spend it. Take some of that time just for yourself to process, relax, ground yourself, and do whatever it is that keeps you going.

Most of all, and as cheesy as it sounds, have fun! There will be things you get to do this year that you'll never get to do again. You will have the most freedom you'll have in your career to try new things as well as to make mistakes, so enjoy every moment of it. You'll find yourself being really hard on yourself this year, so don't forget to look back at how far you've come and celebrate the wins. Hang on to the highs and learn from the lows. You've worked really hard to get to this point, and you are ready.

Hannah Bradsell

Remember why you're here

Why are you in medicine? The answer is easy right? We wrote about it in our medical school applications. We spoke about it in our interviews. We repeated it to ourselves under our breath and screamed our reasons to the sky as we studied, sacrificed, and dreamed about being where we are right now. Clinical year is going to be hard. Clinical year is going to be incredible. You will meet amazing humans, and you may even amaze yourself. Clinical year will make you cry tears of joy; it may make you cry tears of grief. But—*why are you in medicine?* Your answer may change and grow just as you and I have and will. It may stay exactly the same. Whatever your reason is, to be as successful as you can be going into your clinical year, I recommend you say it. Out loud. Again. And again. And hold on to it as tightly as you can.

My gut feeling is that you did not go into medicine because you were excited for shelf exams. I am assuming it was not your passion for ANKI. I am assuming it was not because you dreamed of working weekends, turning down plans to get work done, or watching (& rewatching) lectures, and of being evaluated. While all these things may be an essential step in becoming the most knowledgeable physician you can become, I will bet they aren't the reason why you decided to begin this arduous journey. So—*why are you in medicine?*

I could see my patient writhing in pain. I could also see that he did not want to admit that he was in pain. By this point, he was a seasoned expert on how to live in pain. Chronic pain. Acute pain. Emotional pain. Physical pain. Pain crises were a part of his life at this point, and he was determined to push through it as he had all the others. Except for one thing. Others did not normally last this long. Others were surrounded by friends and family. Others were when he was much younger. Others did not happen in the middle of a financial crisis where he needed to get up and go to work. The thing about chronic pain is that life continues to move. Pain crises don't always wait for you to be ready for them. The mainstay treatment for pain crises is fluids, pain medications, and time. And as this time continued, his motivation waned. When we met each day, I assessed his pain but also asked about the Olympics, the NBA, school, his family, his hobbies, painting, and things that brought him joy. By the end of our time together, he pulled me aside as he was packing for discharge. He grabbed both of my hands and told me that my joy and commitment to his comfort were the only reasons he did not give up. That my daily smile and a new topic of conversation were what kept him smiling. *This is why I am in medicine.*

I had a patient confide in me that I was the first provider to use their pronouns correctly. I had another who confided in me about their home situation and asked if they could ask for me if they ever needed help again. I had a patient show me pictures of her new garden. I had a patient tell me that he has no family, and I was the first person he has spoken to this year. I had a family who asked me if I could help them feed their children. I had a child tell me that their stuffed animal was feeling much better after I listened to their heart. I had a mom tell me that I made her feel heard. I had a woman cry in my arms over the loss of her child. I got to watch new parents hear a doppler tone of their baby's heartbeat for the first time. *This is why I am in medicine.* It is not always easy. It is not always happy. But it is always human. And we have the privilege to experience their humanity alongside them and hopefully make it just a little bit better in the ways that we can. *This is why I am in medicine.*

Medical school is hard. Clinical year will be awaiting with new challenges of its own. If I may challenge you with more one thing, it is to remember why you're here. It is so easy to get lost in the assignments, in the evaluations, in the grades. It is so easy to compare yourself to your classmates. It will be easy to feel like you are not doing enough or that you are not enough. In these moments, remember why you're here. Are you behind on your practice questions? Maybe. But...*did you make a patient feel safe today?* Did you not do as well on an exam as you had hoped? Maybe. But...*did you find a field that brings you*

joy? Did you meet mentors who inspire you? Did you get to immerse yourself in a field that you'll never be able to experience again? Do you feel like you're growing? Were you able to think of a new diagnosis or plan that will help your patient's life for the better? Are you living and experiencing a career that you always dreamed about? I challenge you to allow yourself grace and room for growth this year. I challenge you to ask yourself every. single. day. Why are you in medicine?

Julia Schaffer

It's Good to be Wrong

Dear Clerkship Student,

Congratulations on finishing the preclinical curriculum! I'm sure you've heard this already, but LIC is when you truly start feeling like a doctor and get to apply everything you have learned in the last year. It's so fun! Twelve-hour days will somehow go faster than an hour-long presentation. Weeks of excruciating lectures and endless EOWs and EOCs are behind you. With that, you are also leaving behind hypothetical patients and multiple-choice questions for infinitely complex patients in front of you.

I remember seeing my first patient in the ED who presented with vomiting and diarrhea. There were no buzzwords gathering the history. The patient didn't say, "I went camping and drank unfiltered water," "I ate potato salad that was left out at a picnic," or "I had some reheated fried rice." I asked a question from DOCS, "What do you think is going on?" I was hoping for something like, "It's either A: Giardia, B: Staph, C: Intussusception." The patient was silent. He was 9-months old, but still. So naturally, I babbled like a 9-month-old on my assessment and plan when I presented. I didn't know the right answer. When you're wrong on a test, you review it individually and then move on. Being wrong in front of an attending, fellow, resident, pharmacist, and the patient's family...is quite a different feeling.

The imposter syndrome came. I'm not smart enough to be a doctor. I'm only good at tests, not taking care of real people. At the workstation, I braced myself for some *~constructive~* feedback; my attending said I did a wonderful job. Huh? They said, "You've been a clinical student for two weeks. You're supposed to be wrong, and I'm supposed to teach you why." When I reflect on the LIC year, I realize how much more I learned when I was wrong. So, from someone with quite a lot of experience, here is **some advice and lessons on being wrong:**

- **Any differential is better than no differential.** Push yourself to come up with something, even if it's extremely rare or unrelated.
- **Students can afford to be wrong in clinic.** There are no passing scores. No decision we make isn't double checked. Take advantage of that freedom.
- **Be honest when you don't know.** Say, "I don't know, but here is my best guess," when you present. Nobody will fault you for trying; in fact, they will appreciate it.
- **Being wrong gives a chance for residents and attendings to teach you.** See where your thought process diverged from theirs and apply it to your next patient. This type of learning leads to high-level processing and long-term retention.
- **Keep track of your mistakes and what you learn from them.** You have the whole year with your preceptors; the chance will come for you to show your development.
- **It's okay to feel mortified when you mess up.** I still get that feeling. But remember, struggle, discomfort, and embarrassment are opportunities for growth.
- **Give yourself grace.** It feels terrible to be wrong in front of your preceptors. Acknowledge and process the feedback you get. During those moments, I reminded myself with the words,
You are not perfect, but you are improving.

Little by little, you'll start feeling like a doctor. You will be great this year. Good luck!

Sincerely,
Spencer Buted

Dear Student,

As you advance into your clinical year, I'd like to share a mindset that helped me transition into mine. Back before medical school, I used to be a delivery driver for Amazon. It was a terrible job and required me to drive an enormous van seemingly made of nothing but blind spots through rural back roads where my GPS device routinely lost service. Needless to say, I made a lot of mistakes as I adjusted to my new job.

What helped me keep going even after a terrible day was my decision that I was allowed to make up to ten mistakes each day. *After ten mistakes, I told myself, I could feel bad. But until I reached my tenth mistake of the day, I would simply acknowledge the experience and move on without guilt or any self-flagellation.*

So, I tallied the moments. Took a wrong turn, one mistake. Didn't realize I had two packages for an address and had to double back, one mistake. Ran over someone's mailbox—I think that counted as two or three mistakes. Each time, I mentally added the point and then moved on with my day. And you know what happened? I never actually reached ten. Some days I might hit seven or eight, but most of the time my total stayed much lower. This system was a way for me to process and accept my minor mishaps without labeling myself a failure.

As you embark on this next step in your training, I encourage you to remember that you are a medical student and grant yourself the grace of still being a learner. Note your mistakes and acknowledge the opportunity for learning each one presents, but do not make them a part of your identity. Give yourself permission to move on without guilt for the first ten goofs of the day. Or who knows, maybe your threshold is fifteen. After all, medicine is a bit more complicated than delivering Amazon packages.

KC Hummer

"*Cadaver*" attempts to encapsulate the raw, often conflicting emotions and experiences that arise when encountering a cadaver dissection for the first time. The poem taps into the unsettling yet fascinating process of confronting mortality, where the coldness of the body contrasts with the warmth of human curiosity. Its themes resonate with the emotional landscape that many medical students navigate when stepping into the operating room. Surgery, like dissection, is a deeply personal yet distanced encounter—an intimate act of care performed on a body that is simultaneously present and disconnected.

Cadaver

As you retract her ribs, you will escape from lie to truth.
Clearly now, you will see,
That we are countless rivers flowing downhill from a fountain of youth.
Each path is unique, no journey the same,
Yet, to one body of water, we all will drain.
She will lay before your eyes, but she will not be there,
A quantum consciousness that has disappeared.
She left you with only her physical past, the pieces that remained.
But it will not be enough,
You'll wonder and ask yourself, *what was her name?*
Like a sandcastle washed away by the shore,
You'll imagine whose hands once held her before.
A best-selling novel with its pages ripped from the seams,
You'll wish for the chance to read more than just the product of her genes.
If you let her, she will change you, lead you astray,
Down a winding road of redemption, grasping love along the way.
You'll find that death is only a door, leading to a destination we cannot foresee,
And what a privilege it is to ride these rivers before they meet the sea.

Caitlin Blades

AFTERWORD

We are so thankful to the Class of 2026 for their wonderful letters! The letters demonstrate vulnerability and authenticity. The letters are a mix of prose and poetry and are filled with poignant stories, practical tips, and humorous musings. The gift of these letters provides a roadmap for those who are beginning this challenging phase in becoming a physician. Thank you so much and best of luck in your careers!

Anjali Dhurandhar, MD
Associate Professor of Medicine
Arts and Humanities in Healthcare Program
Center for Bioethics and Humanities

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SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

We welcome submissions to the future edition of *Letters to a Clerkship Student*. Though there is no word limit, we prefer submissions less than 750 words or about one page. Submissions may not include identifiable patient information. We accept both poetry and prose and encourage you to be creative as you dare. If you choose to submit your letter anonymously, stricter criteria for publication will be applied. Please submit your letter to Dr. Anjali Dhurandhar, anjali.dhurandhar@cuanschutz.edu, for consideration for publication. If accepted, your letter can be included on your curriculum vitae as a publication. We look forward to your letters!

