

READY HANDS, OPEN MIND: SMALL, QUIET CHOICES THAT DEFINE US DURING CLINICAL ROTATIONS

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TAKE A MOMENT to think about a time during your medical school career when you did not keep an open mind. Most of you probably immediately think of dramatic clinical examples. Fixating on a diagnosis and failing to consider alternatives. Dismissing a patient labeled as “drug-seeking” who later turns out to have a serious underlying condition. Stifling curiosity for fear of looking stupid or unknowledgeable. These are important and serious manifestations of closed-mindedness.

But what about the quieter, everyday versions? The kind that don’t show up in morbidity and mortality conferences but still shape the kind of physician we become. The kind that manifest during a long day of clinical rotation. The kind that manifest during a rotation in a specialty that you’re not interested in.

Everyday indications of a closed mind might include:

- Turning down learning opportunities when they are offered
- Avoiding a new experience by saying, “I don’t know how to do that”
- Demonstrating a lack of curiosity or failure to ask questions
- Disengaging from a rotation and spending excessive time on your phone because “it’s not what I’m interested in”
- Rejecting constructive feedback or offering excuses instead of reflection

Although these moments feel small and may be easy to dismiss, they are still choices that add up over time to detract from a growth mindset.

Think about a time you were offered an opportunity during a rotation. Did you turn it down? Or did you keep an open mind and ready hands – hands that are eager to jump into an opportunity and work and learn – and say yes?

With about a week and a half left in my surgery rotation, I heard that an amputation was happening in the neighboring OR. Honestly, it sounded disturbing. But in that moment, I had a decision to make. Did I turn it down out of fear? Or did I keep an open mind and embrace the opportunity to see something new?

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On the first day of my internal medicine rotation, I saw a cardiology consult and later was asked by the resident whether I planned to write the note or if he should. Again, a choice. I could have easily said “I don’t know how” and let him do it. Or did I say “yes” and write my first-ever consult note?

OB/GYN was my third (and most dreaded) rotation of third year. I was scrubbed and ready to assist for one of my first GYN surgeries when the surgeon asked if I wanted to place the Foley catheter. Did I?

These moments are not dramatic. No one but you will remember them. But they are pivotal when summed up over four years. So why does keeping an open mind and ready hands matter?

Unfortunately, studies show that intellectual medical curiosity decreases from first-year to final-year medical students. But medical school is not just about learning facts. It is about building habits. Habits of responsibility, humility, engagement, and curiosity. Third year is arguably the most pivotal year, and the way we approach rotations becomes the way we approach medicine and our future patients. Benefits of keeping an open mind to approach new challenges during every rotation might include:

- Improving critical thinking and clinical and diagnostic reasoning

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- Working better with a team
- Cultivating humility and curiosity
- Improving bedside manner and patient-centered care and relationships
- Encouraging more and better constructive feedback
- Experiencing the culture of different specialties
- Promoting ownership of a patient’s care
- Improving gratitude and empathy
- Building the habit of continuing education, medical knowledge, and skill

To answer the previous questions, yes, I scrubbed for the amputation and used the bone saw myself. I also helped close. Yes, I wrote the cardiology consult note. With some help. Yes, I inserted that catheter. Correctly. On the third try.

Sometimes keeping ready hands and an open mind and accepting the experiences that come your way can come with a side of squeamishness. Or a big learning curve. Or some laughter as the surgeon says you’re trying to insert the catheter in the wrong place. But all of these experiences have one thing in common – something I encourage you to think about and embrace. Saying *yes* with an open mind and hands that are ready to jump into work and embrace a new adventure.

But how does one cultivate an open mind as a medical student on clinical rotations? My suggestion is simple: treat every rotation like it is the specialty you know you are going into.

As previously mentioned, OB/GYN was definitely not what I was interested in. I was not looking forward to six weeks of working in sensitive areas. I felt nervous, intimidated, and, to be honest, I dreaded the rotation.

But before third year started, I’d made a commitment to myself that no matter the rotation, I would keep an open mind. So, I treated OB/GYN like it was my

future specialty. I showed up early. I asked questions. I took every opportunity to scrub into surgeries, perform ultrasounds, insert catheters, and take patient histories. I asked about lifestyle, call schedules, and career satisfaction. I made a conscious effort to demonstrate my engagement and interest.

And something unexpected happened. By the end of the rotation, I could actually see myself in the field. Have I decided to go into OB/GYN? No. My goal is still pediatrics. But I kept an open mind and gained a genuine appreciation for why others do choose OB/GYN. I learned its strengths, its challenges, and its role within the broader healthcare system.

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Most importantly, I left with a deeper respect for the specialty and a better understanding of how it intersects with others, including my own. Keeping an open mind does not mean you will change your career path. It means you will become a better learner, a better teammate, and ultimately, a better physician.

Third year rotations are a pivotal point for medical students. And sometimes, it starts with something as simple as saying yes.

With ready hands and an open mind.

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