

Sept-Oct 2022 Residency Times From Your DIO

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One Step at a Time

“Pick up your feet!” I pleaded with my mother while trying to guide/drag her up the flight of stairs, as if she had any control over the situation. It was a nighttime ritual when I was in college if my dad was out of town and my brother was not available, driving home from Ann Arbor to get mom into bed. She had daytime caretakers but this was too much to ask of them. Her legs had failed her many years prior, and she spent the vast majority of my life in a wheelchair getting worse and worse, which seemed an impossibility given that she had already lost the ability to walk. Years later, she would come into the hospital as a medical code while I was working a shift. We would bring her home a couple of weeks later to terminally wean her in the peace of her own bed.

My mother’s disability and illness were central to my childhood. So when my right foot became numb when I was a junior in high school, hundreds of miles away from my family in boarding school, I had a sinking feeling that I knew exactly what was the problem. The formal diagnosis would come a few weeks later, on March 1, 1999, after several appointments with a neurologist and an MRI. Multiple sclerosis. Until that day, I knew I wanted to be a doctor. But the diagnosis had me wondering, would all of the work be worth it? My mother had been diagnosed while she was an OB/GYN resident at Northwestern in the ‘70s. She did all of the grueling work, decades before “duty hours” was a phrase that meant anything, and practiced as an attending for such a short amount of time before the disease took her out of the game. Would history repeat itself?



Ultimately, I decided that I shouldn’t act like I’m in a wheelchair until I was actually in one, so I moved forward with my plans. Undergraduate, medical school, residency. I did all of it, never disclosing my disease to anyone, even close friends. When I would have an exacerbation or an abnormal MRI and needed IV steroids, I would get outpatient infusions and hide my IV access site under a long-sleeved shirt, even in the summer. I never missed a day of work. No one ever noticed or suspected what was really going on. I was very good at hiding things. Even as an attending physician, I did not disclose my illness. I wanted to feel like I had “made it” before I disclosed anything. I worried, maybe irrationally, that if I disclosed my illness and disability, that opportunities would be taken away

from me, that someone else would decide for me what I could or could not do. So I kept my secret to myself until I was ready. It took another 10 years. By then, I was a vice chair in my department and an associate dean at the medical school. Also, the limp in my right leg was impossible to hide, so it was time. With the tremendous support of my husband, I told everybody, faculty and residents, about my illness.

I forwarded the email to my former program director. The secret was out, and the outpouring of support was remarkable.

As a profession, medicine has made incredible strides in diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). But very infrequently do I hear “disability” included as part of these efforts.

According to the [CDC](#), 26% of adults have some form of disability, mobility issues being the most common.

Whether or not you are aware, I am certain that you are working with disabled colleagues or learners. For their sake and for our future colleagues and learners, we need to make sure that disability has a seat at the table of any conversation surrounding DEI. Our colleagues and learners need to know that they are accepted and that they are safe, that opportunities will not be taken away from them because of their disability as I feared so many years ago. My ask is this: re-examine your department’s mission statement, re-examine your recruitment efforts, re-examine the efforts of your DEI committee. Is disability addressed? We are all doing such amazing work, let’s be sure to include this important, but sometimes hidden, group.



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For more information on National Disability Employment Awareness month:
<https://www.loc.gov/disability-employment-awareness-month/about/>.