Developing a Mentorship Relationship

Jeffrey Hackman, MD
Truman Medical Center
For the SAEM Graduate Medical Education Committee

Teacher, guide, counselor. Regardless of what they are called, many people consider a mentor essential to a professional’s success. This may be especially true for people contemplating or entering a career in academic medicine.

The difference between a mentor and an advisor or supervisor may be blurred sometimes, but the difference should be clear in your mind. Residency programs generally assign faculty advisors to residents to keep them on track in the program and answer questions about the residency itself. A mentor, on the other hand, is someone you seek out yourself for guidance on the “big picture” issues: entering academics or private practice, becoming the type of physician you want to be, and “style of medicine” issues. A mentor is someone who has a great deal of interest in you personally and professionally. You will discover that a mentor is someone who’s opinion you will always seek, whose advice you will often take and whose relationship you value. Residents often find that someone is mentoring them even before they realize they have developed such a relationship. While virtually any faculty member can serve as a mentor, some may be more able or willing. Program Directors and senior faculty often fit this role. Perhaps your faculty advisor will evolve into a mentor, but that may not be the case.

A mentor relationship may take the form of a traditional apprentice/expert affiliation. On the other hand, you may find your situation is better suited for a more open mentorship. In this model you work with multiple people, each of whom excels in a particular area. This allows you to draw from the experiences and expertise of several people. Successful individuals often have personal and professional mentors although a single individual can work in some relationships.

You should first decide what you want from a mentor. Are you looking for someone to assist you form your style as an emergency physician? Are you seeking an experienced researcher to help you get started with a career in research? On the other hand, do you want an experienced educator to guide you into a career in academic medicine? A clear target will help you determine who will be able to get you where you want to be. Your mentor may provide advice and direction for everything from your contact negotiations to financial advice.

You then need to identify the people who have the skill sets you want, or the people who embody the type of physician you want to become. If you are just getting started this may be the hardest part of the process because you may not know each person’s specific talents. Your program director, chair, or faculty development chair can be invaluable in identifying the person or people right for you.

Your next step should be to analyze your strengths to determine what you have to offer a prospective mentor. If you can offer your services as a budding researcher or just your enthusiasm as a new physician, it is important to recognize that the most effective relationship with a mentor will be a two way street. It is critical to recognize that mentors mentor because they get personal and professional satisfaction from the relationship.

Finally, you should connect with the person or people you have identified. Take with you the information you have gathered thus far to be prepared to discuss your objectives for your mentorship relationship. Do not be offended if he or she recommends you work with someone else. This may happen if the person you have chosen feels unable to help with your goals, either because of preexisting time commitments or a perceived lack of expertise. Most likely he or she will be eager to help a new physician.

As you approach residency graduation review some of the excellent articles on mentorship available on the SAEM website and elsewhere, as your needs may change once you enter practice. Establishing a mentorship relationship will not only help you achieve your goals but will make your residency and future career more enjoyable.