

# On being a first-year fellow and a first-year mom

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**F**or the past 2 weeks I have been on call overnight and to put it lightly, it has been brutal. Fellow call, unlike resident call, can be taken from home, but some nights it seems almost as though it would be easier to just stay at the hospital. My pager typically starts going off at 5:01 pm and does not stop until sometime after midnight. Nightly, I have been averaging a record number of admissions, consults, outpatient calls, and enough inpatient issues to keep me awake stalking labs and vitals until the early morning, just in time to get the critical lab calls from nursing.

It's 2:37 am and it has been a little over an hour since my pager has gone off. That's just enough time for my sweet 10-month-old son to fall asleep so very peacefully in my arms. After he woke up at around 1:42 am, I ran frantically upstairs to fetch him so that his crying would not wake his twin sister. I know the emergency department will be paging momentarily to present a neutropenic fever, and all I can hope for is that the call does not happen in the next 30 seconds. Thirty seconds being the time it takes for me to lift myself off the couch and get the sleeping baby back upstairs to his crib. It is in this moment, those precious 30 seconds, that my worlds collide. It may not seem like much, but at that very moment I feel 100% responsibility to my 2 new full-time jobs, my job as a doctor and my job as a mom.

For as long as I can remember I have wanted to be a doctor. For as long as I can remember I have wanted to be a mom. For as long as I can remember I never considered being both at the same time. I know this notion seems silly and even a bit naive, but truthfully, I think in my head I always separated these 2 life paths. I had a clear vision of myself as a doctor. I would

complete residency, move on to complete a hematology/oncology fellowship, join an academic practice, cure cancer, alleviate suffering, engage in meaningful research, and ultimately make significant contributions to humankind. I also had a clear vision of myself as a mom. I would have 3 or 4 kids before age 37, be home room mom, spend warm spring afternoons at the park chatting with other moms about the trials of being a suburban housewife, pack lunches daily, cook dinner nightly, learn to enjoy vacuuming, always have the laundry done, and never ever miss a school play, sporting event, dance recital, or bedtime. Perhaps it was around month 2 of pregnancy when it dawned on me that I might not be able to "have it all." I vaguely recalled an article I had read by Dr. Karen Sibert, an anesthesiologist and mother of 4, in which she noted, quite unapologetically, "You can't have it all" (Sibert, K. Don't quit this day job. *New York Times*. June 12, 2011: WK9). I realized that I would likely have to make some serious sacrifices if



I were going to find some sort of balance between work and family – that is, if such a phenomenon exists.

Through the guidance of a few female mentors who are both exceptional physicians and exceptional mothers and my own amazing mother, I have come to a few realizations. Beyond the standard assertions such as "it takes a village" and "make sure you make time for yourself," there are some other insights that I have found helpful in trying to perfect my new full-time job as a doctor-mom:

**Being a mom makes you a better doctor, and being a doctor makes you a better mom.** Although my medical training has taught me how to

treat neutropenic fever, work up a microcytic anemia, and notice the signs and symptoms of hyperviscosity syndrome, it has also taught me patience, understanding, endurance, and compassion. Those last 4 qualities are extremely useful tools when it comes to motherhood. In return, these past 10 months as a mother have shown me firsthand the wonder and fragility of human life, for which I have gained a greater appreciation than ever before.

**Shake the guilt.** Thoughts I had before pregnancy: I forgot my prenatal vitamin last week, guilt. Thoughts I had during pregnancy: I did not eat enough calories today, guilt. I did not rest enough today, guilt. I ate a hotdog, guilt. I went into labor prematurely, guilt. Thoughts I had after the twins were born: I do not have 4 arms to be able to hold them both at the same time, guilt. I could not breastfeed for longer than 1 month, guilt. I have to go back to work, guilt. I only cooked dinner once this week, guilt. I'm not seeing enough patients, doing enough research, staying late enough at the office, guilt. All the guilt is enough to paralyze you and make you think about home while you're at work, and work while you're at home. *Shake the guilt.*

**It'll get easier, then harder, then easier, then harder . . .** From day 1 of bed rest everyone told me it would be easier once I delivered. My twins were born prematurely at 34 weeks and the month they spent in the

neonatal intensive care unit was hard, harder than anything I had ever previously experienced. Then they came home and it was easier, but then my son developed bad acid reflux and it got harder. Then they started to sleep through the night and it was easier. Then they started teething and it got harder. Now they can entertain each other and it's easier. Soon they will be fully mobile and it will get harder. Eventually they will be old enough to recognize that their mom works and leaves them for about 10 hours a day, and this I imagine may be the hardest yet. Then they will start to develop little lives of their own, their own friends, their own interests, and my working will not be as big of a deal for them, and this will at first be easier, but inevitably harder.

The next time I take overnight call will be in a few months and by then my babies will be a little over a year old. Hopefully by then they will be consistently sleeping through the night, and I won't have to worry about 1 of them being on the couch with me while I am trying to answer pages. By then, I will have been both a doctor and a mother for 14 months and although I am fully aware I will not always be both the doctor and the mother I always envisioned, I'll certainly always try to be.

#### **Acknowledgement**

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