



On the path to achieving balance

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It was my first day of medical school and the excitement of this new adventure was palpable in the auditorium. Dr Sheila Harding, then Associate Dean of Medicine at the University of Saskatchewan in Saskatoon, stood at the podium to greet us. She started her speech with an analogy of holding 2 balls, 1 in each hand. One ball was made of rubber, and the other—of glass. She explained that not only throughout medical school, but also throughout our entire careers, we would be challenged: physically, mentally, emotionally, and sometimes spiritually. She cautioned that we would need to decide which aspects of our lives could go into which ball: our studies, families, relationships, exercise, friends, travel, hobbies, etc. Some things could be placed in the rubber ball, and when medicine (or life in general) inevitably gets a bit stressful and difficult to manage, that rubber ball can be dropped. When things slow down, that ball will bounce back up and we can resume the things held in it. However, some things should not be placed in the rubber ball; these things need to be held more carefully, surrounded by glass. Because if that glass ball gets dropped ... there is no bouncing back up. Profound.

Unfortunately, I did not really understand the value of her metaphor at the time. As a type A extrovert—as most of us in medicine are—I really thought I could do it all. Five years into my career and 1 divorce later, I think I am beginning to see her point.

I started my practice in summer 2018. Even though my marriage had already suffered and ended during residency, I still had not fully grasped Dr Harding's words. I wanted to take on a busy maternity practice, work in the emergency department, have a family practice, travel, compete in a bodybuilding show, and try to date again.

Work-life balance


I had absolutely no grace for myself and ran my body and my brain into the ground. Call was heavy and many nights were spent on the labour floor followed by a double-booked clinic the next day. I was over-exercising to deal with stress, but this was hidden by the excuse of working toward a bodybuilding competition. I was getting good feedback from colleagues and patients and was able to find coverage on occasion to travel the world. When the

other family doctor at the maternity clinic returned from maternity leave, I had my first taste of slowing down, but I did not know what to do with that, so I picked up locum work in other communities. I was able to take some longer vacations, and I thought I had this “work-life balance” thing figured out pretty well.

Then came March 2020 and COVID-19. Like most health care workers, I went into overdrive at work. Until that point, I had still felt like I was figuring out how to be an attending doctor. Now there was this new disease, unknown outcomes, and essentially a new health care system. It was challenging. Things like travelling and seeing friends were not possible anymore. And ... I was fine. It was not until after the first wave, when things started opening again, that Dr Harding's message finally sank in. I had survived perfectly well when that rubber ball was forced out of my hand thanks to COVID-19. And when the time came to re-engage with the things in that rubber ball, I was easily able to pick up where I had left off.

A locum position led me to where I now work and call home—Golden, BC, on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories of the Ktunaxa and Secwépemc Nations. The medical community here has opened my eyes to the possibility of creating a career different from the one I had started, including having shared call, covering one another's laboratory results during holidays, and supporting continuing professional development, not to mention also taking up mountain biking and skiing. I also have a pet (Ted) and a new love (Garett).

Conclusion

Having entered my fifth year of practice this summer, I have a better handle on which aspects of my life need to be placed in which ball. When I start to feel myself swaying under the stress of this profession, I remember Dr Harding and the importance of her lesson. 

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Competing interests
None declared

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