



IN-TRAINING AND STUDENT MEMBER CATEGORY WINNER

HANGING ONTO THE COATTAILS



Sarah M. Fisher

The majority of my days as a first-year medical student precepting with a physician were spent hanging onto the doctor's coattails – following him or her around endlessly and soaking in every word. From an early age, I was a curious girl, always asking too many questions. That is still true 20 years later in medical school. I ask my preceptors about labs, X-rays, what *exactly* multiple sclerosis is and how you manage chronic pain without breeding addiction.

During my spring break, I spent most of the week precepting in a family medicine office. My family medicine preceptor instructed me to think about what exactly brings the patient into the office and what his or her expectations from the visit are. As we discussed each patient before and after the visit, I was intrigued by the vast knowledge that he knew and appreciated about his patients. He would ask me, "So why do you think that patient came into the office?" After a moment of thought, I replied, "Because she was scared. Her sister died from a pulmonary embolism, and she is afraid she is going to die just like her." After my preceptor managed a smile, I saw myself hanging onto his coattails.

After precepting, I would go down to the gastroenterology office that I have worked at for the past 14 years and offer to help. Since I'm now a medical student, I was asked to see each patient with the physician and act as a chaperone with the female patients. As we were ushered from one room to the next, the physician would grill me on questions about medications, disease processes and intricate heart murmurs I've never heard. Some I knew, but others I didn't. I was desperately trying to hang onto his coattails.

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With each patient, we would examine the patient together and talk about our findings. Once, I told my physician, "I think that she has a regular rate and rhythm, no extra heart sounds and no murmurs." At that moment, I looked down to see the patient's face white as snow with the same deer-in-the-headlights look that I've narrowly missed going down our country road. Immediately, I reassured the patient: "That is great news, ma'am. That means your heart is working just fine." The relieved look on her face echoed onto my own nervous one, and I was suddenly at ease. After walking out of the room, the physician turned to me and said: "She may have come in with problems with constipation, but now she is leaving even more satisfied because you took care of her. You made her feel at ease. Good job." And then, I was hanging onto his coattails.

After the office closed, the physician and I would drive over to the hospital to make evening rounds. It was in this setting that I was literally hanging onto his coattails. Since I was precepting and working in my small, rural hometown, the hospital was almost like a Wal-Mart – I saw everyone and their brother, and they all wanted to stay and talk when my physician was headed out the door. It's awfully hard not to be rude to the lady who used to check you in at the eye doctor, now isn't it? Learning grace and a sweet goodbye, I desperately tried to keep up with my physician as we sped from room to room, hall to hall. Even though I felt like we were moving quickly, it always seemed that we spent the right amount of time with the patients. We were never rushed and even sat down to talk with the scared family members crowding around the bed of their loved one. There, in a hospital room on the third floor where I stood next to the physician sitting in a chair as he explained what had happened to their loved one, I was hanging onto my physician's coattails.

Hanging onto the coattails – what an idea. It's not just trying to keep up with a racing physician, power-walking down the tiled hallway (with rapid glimpses of the occasional hanging artwork) to see the next patient. It could be quite trying to keep up with physicians' coattails intellectually, rather than physically. It seems that doctors know everything, and that can be daunting to a student. For me, it's both scary and wonderful, riding on a physician's coattails in that manner. It is hard to admit to mediocrity by not knowing something. However, it is reassuring to know that I will learn the material, just like the questioning physicians did, and know the information eventually so that I can benefit my own patients.

Keeping up with physicians isn't the only aspect of hanging onto their coattails. It also includes seeing yourself as a physician, grabbing onto the physician's coattails and holding onto qualities that make him or her a great doctor. I keep a running list of one quality in each physician I know or have worked with that I admire. I force myself to narrow what I love about my family doctor and admire in my dad and every other medical role model into one single trait that I aspire to resemble. Now *that* is hanging onto some pretty hefty coattails – living up to high expectations, a responsibility that I don't take lightly.

Last, and perhaps most important, hanging onto the coattails of physicians is about caring – not just caring about your patients to treat them, but caring how you talk around them so that they can feel at ease to trust you as a physician and confide in you. Beyond that, chasing after coattails also includes caring about how a patient's family will react to his or her illness and thinking about the family unit. Even outside of the patient realm, hanging onto coattails is about fostering medical students who are excited about medicine and want to envelop everything they can about the field. I have seen aging physicians who become cynical and unwelcoming to students. This, to me, is heartbreaking, because those older physicians are the ones whose coattails I want to cling to. They have lived through so much medical history, can show you things like "the poor man's sinus X-ray" and can give you advice on interacting with patients. I hope that practicing physicians never forget the days when they were medical students, desperately hanging onto their attendings' coattails for advice, guidance and teaching.

A day in the life of a medical student is about living up to the expectations and standards that have been set before us by preceding and successful physicians. We will hang onto their white coattails, soaking in every last word and every piece of advice, aspiring to be as caring, intelligent and efficient as they are. Perhaps someday, if we are lucky enough, we too will be the ones who are having our coattails tugged at by eager medical students. And at that time, we will let them, so that we can teach them as we have been taught. Above all else, honor thy teacher. **LM**

Note: Sarah M. Fisher is a rising second-year medical student at the University of Louisville.



On behalf of Dr. Barry, Communications Associate Ellen R. Hale presents Sarah Fisher with her award at The Old Medical School Building.