

Article type : Special Contribution

# Dr. Rodgers' Last Lessons: reflections after the death of a mentor

Corresponding Author:

Josh Mugele, MD

Additional Authors:

Katie E Pettit, MD

Debra S Rusk, MD

Joseph S Turner, MD

Aloysius J Humbert, MD

All authors are affiliated with the Indiana University School of Medicine Department of Emergency Medicine

Mail id: [jmugele@iu.edu](mailto:jmugele@iu.edu)

The Indiana University emergency medicine family is grieving. We, the residency program directors, are grieving. The Monday morning before Thanksgiving, Dr. Kevin Rodgers, KRodge, a lifelong educator and mentor to most of us, was killed in his home following his overnight shift. Kevin's death has shaken us deeply and we are tired from crying. As emergency physicians, we're supposed to know about death – we see it regularly; we write about it in our literature; we comfort the families of our dying patients. But when it is one of our own – a father-figure – we don't know how to react. We can't compartmentalize this. As a way to try to find meaning out of the senselessness, we've been reflecting on what it means to be an emergency medicine educator.

---

This is the author's manuscript of the article published in final edited form as:

Mugele, J., Pettit, K. E., Rusk, D. S., Turner, J. S. and Humbert, A. J. (2018), Dr. Rodgers' Last Lessons: reflections after the death of a mentor. *Acad Emerg Med*. Accepted Author Manuscript. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/acem.13375>

Kevin was the heart of IU emergency medicine. He came here in 1998 and was always involved in residency leadership. Many of us who are now faculty and in residency leadership were residents and chief residents under him, and we were junior faculty alongside him. We sat next to him in the department listening to him staff residents and taking mental notes. We came to this program for him, because he promised to make us world-class physicians.

He was *always* teaching. He taught us how to only give one or two teaching points per patient so we wouldn't overwhelm the learners. He knew a mnemonic for every chief complaint. He taught us how to run meetings. He taught us how to create equitable schedules for the residents. He could teach about *anything*. But more than his teaching, Kevin was a role model and mentor through the way he lived his life. Through him we learned how an educator can impact a learner's life, can inspire intense loyalty, and most importantly can have a ripple effect to the next generation of learners and all of the patient lives they touch. Here are lessons we've learned about being emergency medicine educators from his example:

*Be fully engaged and expect the same from your learners*

Everyone has a story about the first time they met KRodge. From a military background, he was loud and commanding. Interns were scared of him (and sometimes his patients too). If you nailed your presentation on a patient with gastroenteritis, he would ask if they'd recently traveled to Russia because of an outbreak of Isospora there. He practiced the way he wanted us to – he saw every patient, doing his own history and physical. He taught on every patient. It made us want to be the best for him. He did not tolerate mediocrity, and he ended up helping to create a powerhouse of a residency, one known for its rigor and for attracting the best and the brightest. From Kevin we learned that clinical competence is the bedrock of anything else we would hope to accomplish in emergency medicine.

*Stand up for what is right*

Kevin always stood up for what he believed in, and he wouldn't back down. He would not tolerate a consultant refusing to see a patient. He advocated loudly and tirelessly in his role as AAEM president for small democratic groups in the face of the corporatization of emergency medicine. People learned quickly not to cross him or question him unless they were sure of what they were saying. We learned from him that when you believe in something, you stand up for it. You advocate for your patients. You advocate for your family. You advocate for your specialty. You make your voice heard.

*Develop and advocate for your learners*

During residency interviews, KRodge would always tell candidates about all of the accomplishments of the current residents. He bragged on us. He was so proud of us. When he pimped his residents, he pimped them not to prove them wrong or to uncover a weakness, but to draw them out because he

Accepted Article

truly believed they had the knowledge in them. If he asked an intern for the top 20 causes of acidosis and they could only name three, he would give positive feedback and affirmation. He and Carey Chisholm designed the program to maximize resident ownership through resident-run committees. They knew that we did the most, performed our best, when we knew our voices were being heard and we were responsible for our own education. He taught us that to get the most from our learners, we have to believe in them and affirm them.

*Stay humble, stay connected*

As Kevin gained national prominence and became president of AAEM, he never cut back on doing what he loved – teaching medical students and residents. He was never too good or too important to take any department shift. He taught a medical student lecture every month. He went to sim sessions wearing a wig as a distraught family member. At AAEM, he could advocate for emergency physicians everywhere because he was there with us on the front lines. He taught us that in order to be good at what we do and maintain credibility at the big things, we have to stay connected with our learners and with our specialty.

*Teachers teach, always*

Above all, KRodge was a *prolific* educator. He may not have been the most widely published academician, but he was involved in everything. In addition to always carrying a heavy clinical load and being involved in residency leadership, he gave numerous orientation lessons, quarterly oral boards prep, monthly medical student talks, regular Viz Quiz lectures, and countless regional, national, and international lectures. Kevin was always one of the first to volunteer. He taught us as chiefs that when we created a schedule to always make our own the worst. That way no one could complain about the schedule they had to work. His selflessness and his work ethic inspired his colleagues to be involved and to always pick up the slack.

*Create a family of learners*

We consider each other as a family at IU, and this was because of KRodge. He was a family man, a father of four boys, and his instinct was to father us too. He cared deeply about everyone and always remembered their spouses and details about their lives. And he opened up his home. So many residency events, journal clubs, and didactic sessions were held at his house. It was our second home and he treated us like one of his own family. This was especially meaningful to residents who felt a little out of place or who were struggling academically. They had a place to go and feel welcome and comforted. We have seen how much of a family he made us over the past few weeks as we get shifts covered, share a touch on the shoulder, stop each other in the hall and give out hugs.

*Food is a healing force*

Kevin was an accomplished chef. He cooked for every event at his house, catered residency retreats, and brought soups to conference. He made seafood gazpacho, corn chowder, pozole, and pork tenderloin. But his best dish was his crab cake, which he brought out for special occasions. He guarded the recipe closely (though there's a rumor that he gave it out to a resident once to save a troubled marriage), and it was better than any crab cake you could order in a high-end restaurant. If you didn't eat seafood, he would make a meatball sub instead. And sometimes there was a resident who just couldn't stand him and butted heads with him, and for that resident, KRodge would make an extra crab cake just to let him know he still loved him. Food is love, and the best mentoring sessions, we learned, happen in the kitchen, drinking wine and preparing a meal.

*Love and compassion fuel success*

The last and most important lesson we learned from Kevin was to always act from a place of love and compassion. He would teach the brand new interns that we see patients on the worst day of their lives and "they won't care how much you know until they know how much you care." He would also explain to the interns that they should never grow frustrated with why patients are in the emergency department. We don't know what they've been through in life to bring them to this point, he would say, until we have walked in their shoes.

We have many motivators in medicine – academic achievement, renown, money, advancement – but if we aren't motivated by love for our learners and compassion for our patients our accomplishments are wasted. Everything Kevin did was from a place of compassion and love. It may have been hard sometimes, frustrating sometimes, and always loud, but it was love. It is this that gives our life's work meaning. We will be forever grateful to him for this lesson.

*And now abides faith, hope, and love, these three; but the greatest of these is love.*