

## EDITOR'S PAGE

# Priorities

**W**e were out of the country at a medical meeting, again, when the message came. Our daughter and her family were moving from San Diego, her husband having received a job offer that they felt was “too good to pass up.” Christine had lived in San Diego since graduating from law school. My wife and I had seen her and her husband through their wedding and had the thrill of being present at the birth of all four of their children. With the birth of their last two, twin girls, we had filled a particularly significant role in their lives for a period. Now they would be leaving, and our ability to be with them would be dramatically reduced. Needless to say, it left us with a very empty feeling, and prompted me to question why I hadn't spent a great deal more time with them while they were around.

On numerous occasions, after boasting about having seven grandchildren, I had been asked where they live. Upon relating that at least four were in San Diego, I was invariably told, and I concurred, how lucky we were to have them so close. We came to take for granted the fact that we could be at their house in 10 minutes for a visit. So when I was busy, it was easy to put off seeing them for some other time. After all, I had important work to attend to as a physician, academician, editor, and so on. Between deadlines and trips, I often went weeks without seeing them.

I guess it should not have been too big a surprise that Chris and her family would be moving away. My wife and I moved our family, at that time consisting of nearly all of our parents' grandchildren, from New Jersey to California to take a position in cardiology. You couldn't be more geographically separated than that. Our oldest son settled 350 miles from us, but that was prior to grandchildren and at least was drivable. Most of my colleagues in medicine had high-achieving children who were pursuing their careers at some considerable distance from their parents. So, it was not the fact that they were moving that stunned us as much as the lost opportunity to be really close to them, especially the grandchildren. No longer will it be easy to see a school play, or a soccer or Little League game, or to go trick-or-treating on Halloween, or to just drop in for a visit. If there had been periods when I was too busy to visit with them when I lived 10 minutes away, how would I ever get to see them when they live eight to nine hours away?

This whole episode got me thinking about priorities, specifically how precious time is allocated and where our families fit in. It is a well-worn cliché that medicine is a jealous mistress, a concept that I can identify with. As I suspect is true for many of us, I was not infrequently absent when my own children were growing up and I was building my career. Many meals were missed, and I spent a Christmas Eve or two and other holidays in the hospital. Even more important, the focus on medicine was so intense that sometimes it was hard to find enough time to just “hang around” with the kids and exchange idle conversation. There was always a beeper to go off, or a paper to write, or a meeting to attend, or some new information to catch up on. Like most of us, I said that family was the highest priority; the priority was just not always that high. When our children



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were ready to go off to college I wondered where the years had gone, and regretted that I had not spent more time with them while they were still at home. Similarly, the vow to make sure that this would not happen with my grandchildren has been challenged by professional responsibilities.

The point of this essay is that I believe it is very easy for us in medicine to become consumed by our professional responsibilities and not give appropriate attention to our families. It is doubtful that we neglect them; we often just do not assign them as high a priority for our time as we should. This is to the detriment not only of our families, but to ourselves. We can miss out on the unconditional love that only family can provide. There is always another doctor for our patients, or speaker for the meeting, or even author for a paper, but there is only one husband/wife or set of parents/grandparents for any individual. The most important moments of my life have all been with family. It is certain that in later years the memories I will recall most will relate to family, and not to my medical career. I cannot help but believe that this

is true for almost all of us. Therefore, we should live our lives in this manner, being sure to devote appropriate time and attention to our parents, spouses, children, and grandchildren.

As I write this, I am looking about my home office, which is filled with pictures of my wife, children, and grandchildren. I have cherished the times I have shared with them, and wish I had spent more. Therefore, I am resolving at this moment to further emphasize their priority. I plan to be with my family as much as possible, even if it means taking trips to visit them and relegating work to another time. From now on I vow to make my family the absolute highest priority in my life. I urge you to do the same.

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