

White coat, stethoscope, and some thoughts

(An open letter to MBBS students of 2023)

Mohit Gandhi

Dear friends joining MBBS this year, congratulations! You have worked very hard to achieve this, and you deserve a pat on your back for having succeeded.

However, there are several circumstances that may have helped you. Maybe, you have had access to private coaching that your family could afford. Maybe, you were fortunate to have studied in a school which had dedicated subject teachers. You may be someone who did not have to work after school hours to support your family. Or, maybe, it was State's affirmative action policy that helped you. There is no doubt that you have worked hard, but so must have your peers who appeared for the entrance exam but did not make it. And there are many others whose circumstances may not have allowed them to even dream of this career. Reflecting on such relative advantages will help you stay humble and grounded. Moreover, also realize that we live in an interdependent society. Everyone has a specific role to play, and all roles are crucial for our collective wellbeing. And so, hold yourself back from falling into the narrow communities of 'us' versus 'them'; don't let yourself get alienated. This will help develop synergy between you and those around. Healing, after all, is not an individual endeavour.

Secondly, don't be in a hurry to set up your next goal. Your seniors in the college, the established doctors among your extended family or friends, and even your parents will tell you that a graduate degree in medicine is not enough. Some of you might already have

decided to become a cardiologist, or a cancer surgeon. While it is good to have goals and aspirations, take one step at a time. Let your interests grow organically rather than chasing a pre-conceived notion. You have just come out of an arduous NEET preparations journey. Don't slip into NExT preparations immediately. Instead, immerse yourself into the world of medicine. Five years down the line, when a patient is before you, the ability to answer multiple-choice questions will not be enough to provide care to them. So, use up this time to understand your subject well, and pick-up all the necessary skills.

Thirdly, you will largely be exposed to the theory and practice of diagnosing diseases and treating them with medicines and surgeries. In all likelihood, that will also be your major role for the rest of your life. But 'health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social wellbeing and not merely an absence of disease or infirmity' (World Health Organization, 1948). While you will read this definition very soon, it may take a lifetime to realise its meaning. Try internalising this early on.

Fourthly, you will see many things in your medical college which you may initially disapprove of. For instance, you may find some of the people around you engaged in irrational and unethical practices. Because of hierarchy and an overall unsupportive environment, you may have to ignore or adjust with such things. But do not let your innocence die; do not fall to a level where you start justifying such practices. Because if you do

that, you will become part of the same system that your near and dear ones find extractive and discriminatory. There are several individuals in the field of medicine who have preserved their sanity despite an adverse milieu. Look out for such role models and look up to them.

Lastly, be mindful that your medical college can be a home, and the faculty a loving parent that nurtures you and helps you achieve your full potential. But this setting may also be restrictive; it may limit your imagination and creativity. And it may pull you away from the very same people whom you are to serve. So, remind yourself to regularly step out of the four walls of the college, literally and figuratively.

All the above points equally apply to your friends who made it to other disciplines like engineering, law, or commerce. In any domain, not many are able to go beyond their individual selves. One option is to use this as an excuse and join the rat race. The other is to engage with a larger purpose and inspire.

So, as you begin this new chapter of your life, stay humble, don't rush past career milestones, look beyond the obvious, search for good role models, and engage with a larger purpose. And if all this sounds a bit overwhelming for now, just relax and keep these thoughts with you along with the white coat and stethoscope that you must be eagerly waiting to don.

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Poem on covid

Suspended in Time We Wait

C. Sathyamala

*suspended in time
we wait
nerveless
witless
complicit
governmentalised
subjugated
we wait
home's our prison
herd we are
but herd we can-not
your breath my death
covid or cancer
take your pick
we wait
segmented
caged
carcerated*

*panopticalised
for shackles to fall
locked with own hands*

“suspended in time we wait” was written in September 2020. During the COVID-19 lockdown, from end March 2020 to October 2020, I was forced to “shelter-at-place” in a small town in India. The measures that were deployed by the state to contain the pandemic were reminiscent of the strategy of segmentation enforced during the plague epidemic in medieval Europe. With a first-hand worm's-eye view, I could observe the dispersion and working of what Foucault terms as capillary power. The anger, helplessness and frustration that I experienced as a public health physician and epidemiologist gave birth to this poem.

(Source: Sathyamala, C. (2021) <https://www.epw.in/journal/2021/35/postscript/suspended-time-we-wait.html>)