

Beacon Hill Byline by Mary Rogeness

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Doctor for a Day

Last Friday. I had the privilege of spending a day following the routine of two area physicians as a participant in the Mass. Medical Society “Doctor for a Day” program. The program began in Springfield two years ago, and it has now spread to Worcester and Boston. Designed to provide rust-hand exposure to a day of medical practice, the Springfield event included legislators, representatives of the news media and community leaders - and a pair of physicians for each intern, one for each half of the day.

Each intern was fitted with a white coat and such necessities as a pad and pencil and a roll of lifesavers. Only the lack of a stethoscope distinguished us from the doctors. We followed the routine of “our” physicians from the 7 a.m. breakfast to a 5 p.m. wrap-up session, and we were all enlightened, enriched and exhausted by the experience. Only by heeding the advice to “wear comfortable shoes” were we able to keep up with the pace for 10 hours.

I experienced both hospital and office practices, spending the morning on rounds with a pulmonologist (lung specialist) and the afternoon in the office of a gastroenterologist I (digestive tract specialist). Here are my impressions of the day.

For our hospital rounds, we followed up on existing cases and visited patients to consult with other physicians. X-Rays and CT scans are a routine tool of the trade, and my doctor showed me the meaning of irregularities on both image types. I realized the immense value of the scans when I compared the images of a chest X-Ray with the cross-section image of the CT scan. I saw graphic evidence of the hazards of cigarette smoke and, since every new patient seemed to be located several flights of stairs away from the last, I feel that my own lungs were improved by the experience.

We grabbed a quick lunch, squeezing in a review lecture for the third year residents, and then I had to dash to meet my afternoon assignment. The doctor had already begun his afternoon when I arrived.

Office hours were less demanding physically, but required more mental gymnastics. Whenever we saw a patient, the doctor briefed me on the history before we entered the room. I was impressed with the comfortable relationship that existed between the doctor and all the patients. That trust extended to their willingness to allow my presence during their consultations. When we were between patients, the doctor dealt with an ever-increasing stack of records, returning phone calls and handling the last-minute flurry of activity that precedes any weekend.

I appreciated the willingness of so many physicians to make time in their days for outside interns, because we surely slowed them down. I was impressed with the number of women physicians, and learned that the residency program is evenly split between men and women. I learned much, both from my time following in the footsteps of my hosts and from conversations with the doctors about current medical and social issues.