The Wise Phrase “Take Care of Yourself”

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After 10 years of clinical practice, my interest in medical education was sparked by a faculty development program, so four years ago, I took up a post at the graduate school with which I am now affiliated. As a clinical practitioner, I had focused on medical care and education, so I was rather nervous and excited to begin this research, an area in which I was relatively inexperienced. I was looking forward to the welcome speech that I hoped would be inspirational. Instead, the president quietly and calmly delivered the following message to the matriculating students assembled there: “Ladies and gentlemen, please take care of yourselves.” The president exhorted us to look after our health and not push ourselves unreasonably, throughout our entire lives as researchers. I was unimpressed by this, as I considered myself to be on the brink of achieving new things through my research. I was confused about what he intended. Instead of following this advice, I continued to believe that I would thoroughly dedicate myself to achieving my research goals, even if that meant working unreasonably hard.

For someone like me who had been immersed in clinical practice, the life I encountered as a researcher was new and exciting. Meeting researchers from departments other than medicine, such as education, humanities, and social sciences, increased my interest in research. I was always lugging around a heavy bag full of documents and books. As part of my research, I analyzed interview data, although I was nowhere close to a full understanding of them. My tasks sometimes felt difficult, but this feeling was outweighed by gratification. Long hours at my desk left me with bleary eyes and heavy limbs as I continued with the work. However, two years into my studies, I noticed that I had gained 10 kg. I had a wife and two children, so to supplement my stipend, I took on duty-

doctor hospital shifts, mainly on weekends. Before I knew it, my lack of routine and the stress had altered my eating habits. Although I was gradually becoming aware of the changes in my body, I continued to dedicate myself to my research, prioritizing the production of outcomes, and completely ignored my health. At that time, the task of writing my dissertation was the only thing that mattered, and I experienced something like an ongoing runner’s high. Although I was exhausted, I slept little, working feverishly to complete my dissertation.

One day, six months later, I was seized by a sudden back pain and was bedridden. My legs went numb, and I could neither stand nor walk. I was diagnosed with spinal canal stenosis and a herniated lumbar disc. The supposed cause was the long hours I had spent sitting with lack of exercise, in addition to carrying my heavy bag of books and sleeping on a hard bed while on call at the hospital. I was 37 years old at the time, confident of my physical health, had no underlying conditions, and never would have imagined suddenly being paralyzed. However, I intended to continue my research irrespective. I took painkillers, put on a lumbar belt, and although I was aware that it was unreasonable, prepared to travel long distances for the sake of my research. To continue providing for my family, I did not discontinue the duty-doctor hospital shifts. A few months later, the back pain had gradually ebbed, but the pressure from the lumbar belt I had been wearing had caused a rash all around my waist. Then, the rash gradually spread to my entire body, and the itchiness made it impossible to sleep. I was diagnosed with contact dermatitis with a sensitization of the whole body, and I was informed that the pressure I had applied with the lumbar belt had been excessive. The secondary dermatitis had spread to my groin, and I began treatment with steroids. I myself used to prescribe this treatment and could not believe that I was now on the receiving end. I was ashamed that I had allowed my condition to worsen to this extent. What was keeping me from looking after myself? I was inherently a risk-taker, but the idea of being unable to manage my own health was new.

While I was a clinical practitioner, I was in constant contact with other healthcare professionals, and I had come to

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understand the importance of a person's physical well-being. I considered myself a member of the community of a medical institution. However, after my life as a graduate student, which was centered on research, I focused only on professional issues. While as a clinical practitioner, I would consider matters in the context of general contact with others, my dialog with myself was now the matter at hand. I was unable to relativize my physical condition and did not care much about myself. I wish I had noticed the paradigm shift inherent in my transition from clinical practice to research, but instead was engrossed in my research. I am not the only one whose physical well-being is affected by living a life centered around research. Researchers in other fields have had similar experiences [1, 2]. Because of my degrading health, I was forced to slow the pace of my research temporarily. This came with some benefit: I felt that my perception of things, such as my view of my life at graduate school, broadened, as did my connections with others. In addition, my mentor, who was concerned about my poor health conditions, advised me that research is more like a marathon than a sprint, a comment that comforted me.

As I contemplated the changes in my health over the course of my life as a researcher and became more aware of attempts to moderate the flow of time, I happened to recall the words that the president had said at the matriculation ceremony: "Ladies and gentlemen, please take care of yourselves." It occurred to me that this maxim directly reflected my experience as I approached the end of my graduate education. Although mental health has been a major topic in graduate education for a while [3], I think the importance of physical

well-being should take precedence. The president had had personal experience in this aspect and had warned us in advance, but dense as I am, I was only able to understand the meaning of his words after I had suffered from neglecting them. In retrospect, his admonition to "take care of ourselves" was truly wise. With time, my condition improved, but to date, I have intermittent lower back pain. However, when I become aware of it, I give myself the very same advice I was given: "Ladies and gentlemen, please take care of yourselves." It would be a good thing for this advice to become a lifeline for all those who are embarking on a life of a research and for all who remain on the front line and work on it.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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