

# Curiosity: The cornerstone of physicianship, professionalism, and life

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Be Curious. Read Widely. Try new things. What people call intelligence just boils down to curiosity.

—Aaron Swartz<sup>1</sup>

**B**eing curious is a quintessential part of being human, driving us to learn and adapt to new environments and change. Without curiosity we struggle to be good learners and have difficulty adapting to new information. Curiosity is a fundamental human thought process, much more than an information seeking process.

In 1899, psychologist William James called curiosity, “the impulse toward better cognition,”<sup>2</sup> or the desire to understand what you know and what you do not know. Curiosity is a poorly understood drive to obtain access to information, dispel uncertainties, and acquire knowledge. It is an intrinsic drive for information. The function of curiosity is to motivate learning, thereby also enhancing and facilitating learning.

Curiosity is strategic exploration for seeking unfamiliar and new options to think about and consider. More new options for consideration may seem confusing, but the ultimate purpose of curiosity is to reduce uncertainty. Curiosity improves performance and activates continuous learning. Along with reflection, it is integrated with our other cognitive processes and is critical for learning.

## Time constraints hinder curiosity

Due to the overwhelming time constraints of physicians today, they often lose their ability to be curious. The doctor-patient relationship has become a structured list of questions:

- What is your chief complaint?
- What is your present illness?
- What is your past medical history?
- What is your family’s medical history?
- When was your last physical examination?
- What symptoms are you experiencing?
- Have you had any recent medical tests?

In clinical care today, there is too little time for physicians to be curious, develop a quality relationship with their patient(s), and be reflective on their medical and communication skills. To be effective and caring, physicians need to regain their fundamental curiosity about life, work, family, patients, their families.

Curiosity was essential for getting into medical school, becoming a physician, and further developing into an accomplished practitioner.

## Using curiosity to solve problems

Rudyard Kipling said, “I keep six honest-serving-men (They taught me all I knew); Their names are What, and Why, and When, and How, and Where, and Who. I send them over land and sea, and I send them east and west; but after they have worked for me, I give them all a rest.”<sup>3</sup> And, Albert Einstein said, “I have no special talent. I am only passionately curious. The important thing is to not stop questioning. Curiosity has its own reason for existence.”<sup>4,5</sup>

He also said, “We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them. If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution I would spend 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question I could solve the problem in five minutes.”<sup>6,7</sup>

Curiosity, with a caring and humanistic approach converts strangers, i.e., patients into people with whom to empathize. A simple modification to a few of the above questions—How are you? How can I help you? What can I do to help you?—can make a tremendous difference in the information a patient and/or their family are willing to share. Curiosity is part of caring and stimulates exploration, enhances understanding, and leads to problem solving. It opens and improves lines of communication and stimulates interest.

Curious physicians go beyond the science of medicine to a way of being that is more knowledgeable and relatable to their patients and to their colleagues. In medicine today, patients are often seen as work units (relative value units

(RVUs)). These situations frequently suppress curiosity as the physician becomes too busy to be curious. The reward for curious patient interaction, is a special doctor-patient relationship, which is therapeutic for all involved, and can help in diagnosing and treating the patient. It also results in great stories, memories, and inspiring moments in medicine.

As physicians, we must rediscover the importance and gift of curiosity and ensure its continuity to improve care and our lives and work. We must maintain the vigor of our art and science which will ultimately make the care of patients more interesting, rewarding, and successful.

### **Curiosity and servant leadership**

Curiosity is critical to success as a leader. It helps with active listening and the retention of information. It has the advantage of helping to take in more than you are giving, and to better understand your, your team's, and others' perspectives. Curiosity helps to demonstrate empathy while trying to understand other points of view, and learn from others' experiences and knowledge. It allows for an open understanding of challenges to ideas while also developing opportunities for collaboration.

Effective leaders must regularly reinvigorate their curiosity and inquisitiveness skills. This means asking key questions, listening, reflecting, and always asking more questions.

Curiosity can also lead to greater development as a servant leader. It stimulates exploration, imagination, intelligence, and learning through reflection, examinable facts, observation, and study with colleagues, teams, mentors, coaches, and the community at large. Keeping in mind that everything can be interesting, important, and worthy of our time, the curious leader must also find time to think. It is important to remember that there is always time to think.

### **Taking time to think**

A skilled leader must learn to develop a way to make sense of competing pressures and challenging, complex problems. Many leaders facing a complicated problem often respond immediately with a reactionary, solutions-based answer rather than asking the right and best questions. The rule is ask, rather than tell. This allows for understanding, exploring various solutions, and obtaining from myriad perspectives knowledge. Excellent leaders listen to understand before responding. They don't need to immediately demonstrate their knowledge. Those who listen well to understand will ask additional questions like, tell me more about that, or help me to understand

that better. This demonstrates that they are curious and open to learning from others.

Effective leaders must also leave time and openness for the entire team, and others, to share and contribute, and then allow even more time for quiet reflection. They must think strategically to help connect to the mission and vision of the organization. It is also important to be open to change if, and when, it becomes clear that a particular decision or a certain course is not working or is not the best response to a problem or challenge.

Leaders must also develop resilience to deal with confrontation, missteps, and unsuccessful choices and decisions. They must learn, transform, and adapt based on difficult experiences. Adaptability empowers leadership development and enables growth.

However, leadership can be dangerous—emotionally, mentally, and physically. Leaders must be able to master and maintain composure amidst barriers and chaos. They need to be able to lead with poise.

### **Continuous learning and growing**

As physicians and individuals, we must be curious about our unique personal identity, which has been developed from childhood, and our professional identity, which we developed and adapted throughout our educational journey. This requires ongoing continuous learning and practice.

We are continuously leading ourselves through a voyage and expedition of self-discovery. We can't change what happened in the past, but with reflection, we can change the way what happened occurs for us. Maintaining curiosity at all twists and turns of our journey, allows us to see things, situations, people, interactions, and behaviors differently. It denotes progress within journey, and transformation in our way of being, acting, and leading.

It is important to reawaken the curiosity in life and work, as *New York Times* bestselling author Chip Conley states, "At the heart of great leadership is a curious mind, heart, and spirit."<sup>8</sup>

### **The importance of others' curiosity**

Often times it is necessary to respond to questions raised by others, which in turn forces us to be curious. This may also influence our response.

As a personal reflection, I had just finished my endocrine fellowship and was seeking my first faculty position. I had an interview with Dr. Al Tarlov (AQA, University of Chicago Pritzker School of Medicine, 1956), chairman of medicine at the University of Chicago. We had finished the interview and I accepted the position of assistant professor

of medicine in endocrinology with clinical, research, and teaching obligations, salary, space, and other support. Tarlov said to me, “I want to deeply apologize, but I never asked you what you would be if you could be and do anything?”

It took me some time to reflect and respond. After a pause, I answered, “I believe we are losing general internal medicine to multiple subspecialties in medicine, the care of patients, medical education, and scholarly work. If I could do anything, I would focus on creating and building a division of general internal medicine and work to teach and guide medical students, residents, fellows, and faculty in the care of patients, teaching, and scholarly work.”

He responded, “At the University of Chicago we are modeled after the Mayo Clinic with all subspecialty services, but no general internal medicine. If you arrive in the emergency department with chest pain and hematology is on-service, you will be admitted to the hematology service. We have planned for two years to create a strong division of general internal medicine. When you start here you can begin to work on a new general internal medicine academic division with three inpatient services, two outpatient services, a consultation service, generalist research and scholarly work, and medical student rotations and a general internal medicine residency.”

I’m not sure if Tarlov hadn’t been curious and asked me that one important, career changing question, I would have been able to establish such a successful new division at the University of Chicago.

Another personal reflection was several years later when I was the head of a new division of general internal medicine at the University of Colorado School of Medicine and Vice Chairman of the Department of Medicine. I cared for many patients, including the President of the University of Colorado, Dr. Gordon Gee. Often, near the completion of a visit I had the luxury of having time to talk with my patients and inquire about their personal lives and family members. These were very rewarding conversations.

Following a medical check-up and during our post-visit conversation, Dr. Gee asked about an upcoming sabbatical I was scheduled to take. I responded that it was on hold until the Dean had coverage for my responsibilities. He then asked me what my plans were once it got scheduled? I responded, “I don’t know. I work every day to be a better clinician, teacher, and scholar and don’t want to go learn a new research activity.”

He then asked, “What did you want to do before you were professionalized?”

I answered that I was a history major as an undergraduate and thought I would get a PhD and become a professor

of history and write books and teach. I thought someday I might become a president of a small college or university.

He responded, “Well, why don’t you do that?” He told me about the American Council on Education, the organization of university and college presidents and chancellors and how they had a fellow in leadership program with 30 participants each year. He said he would be happy to nominate me. I did some research, applied for the fellowship (with a letter of recommendation from President Gee) and was selected. I spent one year in the fellowship wherein I was mentored by President John Casteen at the University of Virginia.

Were it not for President Gee’s curiosity experience, I would not have had one of the best experiences of my career, which led me to several incredible leadership positions at the University of Colorado System, Chancellor University of Colorado Boulder, state and national organizations, and as the Executive Director of Alpha Omega Alpha Honor Medical Society and Editor of *The Pharos*.

Curiosity is paramount to being a good physician, spouse, friend, and colleague, and we must persevere to regain and maintain it in our lives, regardless of the roadblocks that may be thrown our way.

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