I failed

No, I didn’t get an F in medical school. And no, I did not fail my boards. But I did fail. It happened in my first year of medical school.

I hope by sharing this story you can avoid the mistakes I made and recognise that failure is part of success.

My first year was far more demanding than I had expected, and I was soon struggling to keep up. Fortunately, I was assigned a tutor. I can remember our first encounter as though it were yesterday. I left for my appointment, and I was delayed on the way with no means to let him know that I would be late. This was a time before mobile phones and credit card calls. By the time I arrived my tutor was furious.

The encounter began, “How dare you waste my time like that? I am a full professor, and you have no right to be late.” The fact is that I was wrong. After what seemed like an eternity, I was dismissed and received no help in medicine that day. He did, however, agree to meet me again. I wonder if he saw the tears welling in my eyes.

I met him weekly for months. I spent hours and hours learning physiology, but I spent at least as much time trying to make up for my failure. I got to appointments hours early. I studied my professor’s homeland and tried to learn about his culture and language. I asked specific questions in the sessions so that he knew that not only was I interested in his help but also in him as a person. I gained the knowledge necessary to complete the course, and I learnt about a new culture and about a full professor’s career path. I found myself looking forward to each visit.

Now I am a professor at a US medical school, and I work with struggling students. My experience has taught me behaviours that I should avoid as well as skills and attitudes that can serve my students. Because I worked to form a relationship with my faculty tutor, I put more effort into my learning—and so did the professor. Now I show my students that I am interested in them as people, their human trials, and their dreams. They, in turn, put in extra effort. Even potentially difficult interactions have been sweetened because I had built a relationship.

I had some great experiences in medical school, and even the bad experiences have a good lesson. I need to help each student identify these lessons. I hope that this time I don’t fail.

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Competing interests None declared.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.

Skin colour versus skills

We are medical students of Indian origin who study with students from countries such as Turkey, Nigeria, Syria, Greece, Macedonia, and the United States in a small but rapidly growing town in Bulgaria. It never crossed our minds that racism could creep into the heart of a noble profession, where your origin, ethnicity, skin colour, and religion are secondary to your skills.

Finally, in our third year, we have the invigorating taste of being clinical doctors instead of lab rats and the opportunity to learn something new with each class. But in one of these exciting sessions we met a horrible reality of life—racism.

Our teacher told us to take the history of a patient. We were supposed to see this patient a week before, but a group of Bulgarian students were keeping him preoccupied. After initial questions, we tried to extract as many details about his condition as possible with our colloquial Bulgarian, which is well tuned for this purpose. But he refused to cooperate.

He began to berate us vehemently, using words that we couldn’t at first understand. He repeated a couple of phrases often enough for us to get the gist of what he was saying: “You are dark skinned people. I refuse to answer any more of your questions. Bring me white Bulgarian students, who actually belong here unlike you aliens in our country.” Perplexed, we returned to our teacher, our pride wounded, to explain what had happened. Even though she was one of the most senior doctors in the department she could do nothing to change his attitude or make him cooperate.

With an air of defeat we continued with the rounds for the day. The doctors around us told us to take it in our stride, to forgive, because people with racist attitudes have seen less of the world and are not as accepting as they ought to be. We are lucky that there are enough of us studying here to comfort each other. The closed minded racist attitudes of a minority that unfortunately still exists can break spirits and cause aspirations to be compromised.

As the victims of unequal treatment we need to develop thick skins quickly so that it will not affect or alter our passion to pursue our dreams. Hopefully, along the way we can change a few minds: not by cursing back in frustration but through our actions.

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Competing interests None declared.

Provenance and peer review Not commissioned; externally peer reviewed.