

Do Best What People Need Most

The well dressed mother stood leaning into her 8 year old daughter as she sat at the end of the examining table. This was a “sick visit” scheduled the same day, with the nurse’s note stating only “URI” for upper respiratory infection. I introduced myself and asked how I could help. The mother explained that her daughter had a sore throat and a cough. Questions revealed that the cold had been there for only a day, there was no fever, the cough was dry (not bringing up any phlegm) and according to the child, the sore throat “wasn’t bad”. I began to play my usual game of “what’s wrong with this picture.” Generally, I would expect the mom to be sitting in the chair across the small examining room. While I see many patients with URI, generally the problem has been there several days and often something to distinguish this episode from others in severity—can’t swallow, coughing up ugly green phlegm, high fever. After all, kids have an average of about 8 upper respiratory infections per year and see the doctor for (on average) less than 1 infection a year. Why was this mother-daughter dyad here with this illness on this day? After finishing focused exam confirming that there were no signs of anything other than a mild URI, I commented, “For a lot of people, colds tend to happen at the very worst time. There’s a reason for that. Stress tends to suppress the immune system and make us more susceptible to infection.” What I didn’t say is that patients are also more likely to visit the doctor for the exact same symptoms at times of stress, perhaps because it is more difficult to cope with those symptoms at that time. Or perhaps the minor symptoms are a “ticket of admission” to get into the office about a hidden problem. “Anything like that going on for you?” The mom was taken aback. Surprised by the question she stuttered “N-n-n-oo.” Her daughter gave a perfect prepubescent eye-roll and exclaimed “MAAAHM!” they exchanged glances, with a hint of fear passing between them. Mom collected herself, wheels turning visibly in her mind as she considered her options. Then she explained to me - a total stranger—that her husband had gone on an alcoholic binge this weekend and had wrecked the house. No, he didn’t hit their daughter. Yes, he did hit his wife. She lifted her shirt bashfully to reveal several large areas of deep bruising. “Damn,” the recesses of my brain cursed me, “That changes your day completely.” The young girl in this story did not need my help for her URI. The family definitely needed help in moving from this dangerous situation to safety. **Do best what people need most.** See the need. Meet the need. Eyes wide open. Despite personal cost.

It is important to find what we do well and what we are **passionate** about doing in our professional lives. To practice authentic public health, it is helpful if what we are passionate about is of **greatest service** to the **greatest number of people**. See the need. Meet the need. Eyes wide open. Despite personal cost. There are perhaps as many things people need most as there are people, leaving us plenty to choose from in finding our place of knowledge and passion. Within this call to action, we each have the latitude to choose which people we serve and which needs we are most capable of addressing effectively. Authentic public health demands service orientation. How we serve depends on who we are. We may serve a narrow population in a specific way. All populations have needs. We may choose the areas of greatest impact on health to the greatest number of people. We may choose the most effective strategies to have a broader influence. How we do best depends on who we are and what gifts we possess. Who we serve depends on who’s needs we choose to focus on.

To do best what people need most is in part a call to service orientation and in part a pathway to effective service. While different people have different needs, there are certain needs that are universal: people need respect; people need to be heard; people need justice; people need opportunity; people need relationship. While different professions have different training, all professions can offer respect, listening, fairness, opportunity and relationship. **Do best what people need most.** See the need. Meet the need. Eyes wide open. Despite personal cost.