

Makenzie Kohler

Texas A&M University Vital Record for the College of Medicine

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Becoming a Doctor and the Life that Follows

A look into the life of Dr. Stephanie Bruce, MD, College of Medicine class of 1997

When she was a third-year medical student, Stephanie Swafford received an opportunity to write about her experiences in medical school. The two essays she wrote appeared in the 1996 anthology “Becoming Doctors,” edited by Parminder Bolina. Now, as a wife, mother, and OB/GYN with over two decades of clinical experience, Dr. Stephanie Swafford Bruce has contributed once again by sharing her experiences in the sequel anthology, “Becoming Doctors: 25 Years Later.”

“Becoming Doctors”

“Becoming Doctors” was designed to give diverse perspectives on the joys and challenges of being a medical student. The anthology features poems, stories, and illustrations by over 90 medical students across the United States. This content gives those outside of the medical field an intimate look into the thoughts and emotions of physicians-in-the-making.

To continue the story of these students, most of whom are now practicing physicians, Parminder Bolina, who is now an internal medicine physician and CEO of Bettehr, compiled the sequel “Becoming Doctors: 25 Years Later”, which was published in 2021. “Becoming Doctors: 25 Years Later” features follow-up essays from 25 of the original contributors, one of whom is Dr. Bruce. These essays describe the many different experiences that can be had after medical school. The collection is meant to paint a picture of the journeys that are possible after medical school is completed.

In the original anthology, Dr. Bruce describes two patients that she encountered while on her internal medicine rotation. “Lily” was a stroke patient. Her stroke had paralyzed one side of her body and

taken away her ability to speak. Lily was the first stroke patient that Dr. Bruce had treated, leaving a lasting impression. Discouraged by treating someone who would never recover, Dr. Bruce struggled with deciding if she was in the correct profession. Later in her internal medicine rotation, however, Dr. Bruce treated a stroke patient who would eventually fully recover. The gratitude of the patient's family struck Dr. Bruce, and she then knew she had chosen the right profession.

Becoming a Doctor

From as long as she could remember, Dr. Bruce knew that she wanted to be a doctor, specifically a pediatrician. She completed her bachelor's degree at Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas. When she interviewed for medical schools, Texas A&M University's College of Medicine sparked her interest. At the time, Texas A&M's College of Medicine offered a program called Leadership in Medicine, where students were paired with mentors outside of clinical medicine to learn about being leaders. After learning of this program, Dr. Bruce knew where she wanted to attend medical school. Once admitted to the program, Dr. Bruce was paired with Dr. Barbara Gastel, a physician and professor at Texas A&M who specializes in biomedical writing and editing.

"I was very excited about that program," said Dr. Bruce, "And very excited about being paired with someone like Dr. Gastel, who not only was a physician, but had some interests outside of medicine and could help me be more well-rounded."

Under the mentorship of Dr. Gastel, Dr. Bruce was able to explore her interest in medical writing during her final year of medical school. She was awarded the British Medical Journal (BMJ) Student Clegg Scholarship, through which medical students spend time at the BMJ to learn about running and writing for a medical journal.

"She was clearly someone who was very bright and thoughtful and had broad interests," said Dr. Gastel, "She had interest in the scientific aspect of medicine, but also a strong interest in literature and more broadly in the humanities. And so, I was very lucky to have her as a student."

Dr. Bruce received her medical degree from Texas A&M University in 1997. She found that pediatrics did not suit her as well as she had envisioned. Instead, Dr. Bruce decided to pursue gynecology and obstetrics.

“I love women as patients; I think they make great patients,” said Dr. Bruce. “A lot of [obstetrics and gynecology] was happy, healthy, preventative care. And I enjoyed the surgical aspect as well, so I thought there's just really a lot of variety in this.”

Dr. Bruce completed her residency through the University of Texas at Tomball Regional Medical Center, now the HCA Houston Healthcare Tomball. Having grown up in Tomball, she had worked at the medical center in high school as a Health Occupation Student of America. After residency, as a physician practicing at Tomball Regional Medical Center, Dr. Bruce became the first female chief of staff and a member of the hospital's peer review committee.

Staying within the area, Dr. Bruce later moved her practice to Houston Methodist Willowbrook Hospital, where she continues to work. She joined Houston Methodist Willowbrook as the chair of the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology, where she was awarded Physician of the Year in 2015.

Interests Outside of Medicine

During her time as chair, Dr. Bruce explored different interests and opportunities outside of clinical practice.

“I needed a change, just to keep things fresh, and so I could learn more and do more,” Dr. Bruce said. “I always felt like I just wanted to make a difference on a larger scale.”

Dr. Bruce's medical practice had always focused on bringing the best care to patients. Soon after beginning her search, Dr. Bruce found healthcare quality to be one of her passions. The Institute of Medicine, now the National Academy of Medicine, has defined healthcare quality as "the degree to which

health care services for individuals and populations increase the likelihood of desired health outcomes and are consistent with current professional knowledge."

"I was really interested in quality work as department chairman, and in the last 10 years of medicine, quality and quality outcomes data and metrics have become so much more important." Dr. Bruce said. "It's all about putting patients at the center of care. And so, quality has to be a huge part of that."

Because of her interest in quality work, Dr. Bruce applied for the Master of Applied Science in Patient Safety and Healthcare Quality at Johns Hopkins University. This online master's program teaches healthcare professionals evidence-based strategies and protocols designed to lower rates of patient harm and increase satisfactory clinical outcomes. Dr. Bruce was accepted to the program and graduated in 2020. This led to Houston Methodist Willowbrook's offering her the assistant chief quality officer position, which she currently holds. To her surprise, there was another new position waiting for her as well.

Texas A&M University's College of Medicine, which has had a campus at Houston Methodist Hospital since 2014, was looking to expand their campus to a community hospital. In 2019, Houston Methodist Willowbrook Hospital became a part of Texas A&M's Houston Regional Campus, with Dr. Bruce as the on-site dean of medical students.

"I had no idea that medical students were going to become part of my career. And that my college, my own alma mater, would be knocking on our door wanting to bring medical students here," Dr. Bruce said. "But I certainly felt like it was meant to be that. That was the school I had chosen so long ago ... I was just perfectly placed in my hospital and in my position to fulfill that role."

Dr. Bruce has since stepped down from the chair position and has reduced her practice from gynecology and obstetrics to gynecology-only. She now splits her time between her gynecology-only practice, dean of students work, and quality work.

Humanities in Medicine

As the dean of medical students and assistant chief quality officer, Dr. Bruce has had the opportunity to help mold medical students' learning. Medical training has traditionally had two divisions: approximately two years where students focus largely on basic science, followed by two years where they apply that knowledge to working with patients. Dr. Bruce thinks of the two traditional divisions as intertwining cords, and Texas A&M University and other medical schools across the nation are moving to add a new chord, health system science. When all three chords are intertwined together, she says, the result is a stronger rope.

Health system science looks at how physicians work with patients and each other to improve the delivery of healthcare services. This can include considering a patient's population when determining treatment, the potential cost of a healthcare treatment, and the teamwork needed within the healthcare system to provide adequate care to patients.

"It's not just the doctor, or just the patient, or just the two of you. It really is so much more than that. There's a whole team, and how that team comes together and works," Dr. Bruce said.

To help further include health system science in the medical school, Dr. Bruce is developing elective courses for students to take. The topics will include administrative medicine, leadership in medicine, hospital functionality, and more. The electives are intended to provide students with ways to explore their interests outside of clinical medicine while giving them tools to become well-rounded, well-equipped doctors.

"I believe that the physicians of today, the great ones, the successful ones, the ones you want to take care of you and your family and the ones I want to take care of me and my family can't just be the smartest book people or the best clinicians," said Dr. Bruce. "They really have to understand the whole health system that they're working in, that they're in, and that their patients are in."

Dr. Bruce is also involved in incorporating arts and humanities into the hospital itself. She is currently working with the Fincher Museum of Fine Arts in Houston to help weave art into medicine. To begin building this connection, she worked to bring the museum's team to the hospital for the students to interact with at their holiday party. Houston Methodist Willowbrook Hospital has already started to incorporate art into the hospital, with commissioned murals being painted on the walls.

During Houston Methodist Willowbrook's recent quality and patient safety symposium, a nurse presented the results of a project that looked at music and patients' anxiety levels. It was found that music had reduced patient anxiety, which led to a reduction in the need for restraints.

"Our [Neonatal Intensive Care Unit] director heard that and said, 'I would love this in the NICU with the tiniest little babies. Maybe there's music therapy that will make a difference,'" said Dr. Bruce.

Recently, the NICU at Houston Methodist Willowbrook received a donation to include music therapy within the NICU for the next five years.

Coming Full Circle

Humanities have been a priority for Texas A&M University's College of Medicine since its founding, and they have always been a part of Dr. Bruce's life and career. Her essay submission to the original "Becoming Doctors" was just the start of a life-long trend of incorporating humanities into medicine. Her career has taken her in directions that she would have never guessed were possibilities.

After 24 years as a physician, Dr. Bruce still conveys the same positive outlook on her career choice in "Becoming Doctors: 25 Years Later" and confirms that she made the right decision for her life. She says her profession has let her participate in the most joyous moments of a person's life, and she cherishes the opportunities that being a doctor has given her. Her essay describes that the deep relationships formed between a doctor and patient are some that last for decades. Dr. Bruce's profession has had highs, but with the highs, there are also the lows. She explains that being a doctor includes being there for people in the worst of circumstances. The devastation of a patient does not escape the doctor,

and Dr. Bruce is not an exception to this. “It is the counterbalance of the joy that should have been that causes tragedy to cut so deep when things don’t go well,” Dr. Bruce wrote in her recent essay. However, the joyous moments of being a doctor and the relationships cultivated with patients are why Dr. Bruce has embraced her career choice.

It has been over twenty-five years since the original “Becoming Doctors” anthology was published with Dr. Bruce’s contributions. Throughout those years, she has continued to contribute to the medical field in various ways. From being a medical student at Texas A&M University’s College of Medicine to now being an established physician and on-site dean of medical students, Dr. Bruce has truly come full-circle.

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