



'Free to Be Me': A Physician's Thoughts on Professional Identity Formation



In recent years, the notion of professional identity formation — feeling and acting like a physician — has become a hot topic in medical education. While professional identity formation has been described as a dynamic process achieved through socialization that results in individuals joining the medical community, the main focus seems to be on enculturation into the medical profession. For me, it has been a much more complicated process — one that has involved coming to terms with my multiple “identities.”

Today, I am board certified in family medicine and addiction medicine. However, I didn't start out that way: I initially trained as a dentist and got board certified in dental public health. Then, in my quest to “do more” and potentially “save the world,” I obtained a master's degree in public health, eventually becoming a physician. Given my unusual path, it is no wonder that people aren't always clear about my professional identity.

One instance in particular stands out: While I was program director of an addiction medicine fellowship, I told a childhood friend who knew about my career transitions that I was going to a conference. To my surprise, she asked if it was a dental conference. Her reasoning was that she thought I might have been interested in “keeping up” with the dental field. Given my responsibilities at the time — attending both addiction medicine meetings and medical education conferences — there was no time for me to even attend meetings in my primary specialty of family medicine, so the expectation that I would routinely attend dental conferences seemed unrealistic.

Another time, at the beginning of a workshop for medical residency applicants, I mentioned that I had been a dentist prior to attending medical school. Later on during the workshop, someone introduced me as “Dr. Simoyan, who works in dentistry.” I thought I had made it clear that I was a physician, especially since the event was for medical graduates. While I didn’t mind telling people that I had been a dentist in a past life, I was a little concerned that people might be confused about what I actually did, if my past profession kept being emphasized.

Despite the occasional confusion, I have found that having a past in another field can be helpful. That I was no longer working as a dentist did not stop me from recognizing the importance of oral health, and in fact I was better positioned to address a gap in medical education. Fresh out of residency, as a faculty member at a new medical school, I developed an oral health training initiative for medical students. The artificial separation between oral health and systemic health can have devastating and even fatal consequences, as in the case of Deamonte Driver, a 12-year-old boy who unfortunately lost his life due to a brain abscess that was a complication of a dental infection. Real life cases like this demonstrate the importance of oral health, especially since some medical students didn’t seem to understand the need to learn about something that they thought was specific to the field of dentistry. (I find it interesting that they never seemed to question the need to learn about the eyes and ears, which, along with the mouth, belong to the same part of the body!)

The issue of professional identity is even more complicated for those of us who have significant interests outside of medicine. When I was beginning my medical career, I felt I needed to keep my various “identities” separate. On the one hand, I was an academic physician, and on the other, I pursued music, photography, and non-medical writing. Even though there was a growing recognition at the time of the importance of medical humanities, it was a challenge to incorporate these artistic interests into my professional work — I wondered if people would take me seriously as a physician if they had first encountered me in another role. I even played hypothetical conversations in my head: “Is she a real doctor?” “Didn’t I see her playing the guitar the other day?” “Does she know what she’s doing?”

acutely aware of my limitations. But unlike medicine, music and photography are fields that don't require training or licensure to ensure success. In fact, I recently met someone who ran a thriving photography business for most of his career, despite lacking formal training in the field. Regardless of my own lack of artistic training, I have learned to develop my abilities in these areas and have now found creative ways to incorporate the arts into my clinical and academic work. The sense of validation I get from patients who tell me how much they appreciate my group sessions that include music, or from passersby in the hospital hallway who hear me playing the piano and stop by to thank me, is priceless.

Rather than wondering if there is something "wrong" with me and why I can't be like everyone else, I have learned to embrace all my identities and express myself fully. Each informs the other, and being able to fluidly go between them is a mark of flexibility that can only enhance, not detract from, my position as a doctor. I often recall my father's reaction to my multiplicity: When I initially decided to study dentistry, he was disappointed, since he had wanted me to be a physician. After I eventually did become a physician, he enjoyed telling people that his physician daughter "was also a dentist."

These days, my professional identity as a physician also includes my other identities. It's taken a while, but I am learning to be comfortable with simply embracing all the parts that make me the unique individual that I am — a process that has been truly liberating.

If you have multiple identities outside of "doctor," how do you square them? Share in the comments!

Dr. Olapeju Simoyan is an addiction medicine specialist and a full professor in the department of psychiatry at Drexel University College of Medicine. A member of the American Medical Women Association's music and medicine committee, Dr Simoyan has curated a photographic exhibit featuring prominent women in medicine. She plays several musical instruments, and has recorded an instrumental piano collection, Christmas Melodies. She has combined her interests in writing and photography in three photobooks, Scranton, A Place to Call Home, The Amazing World of Butterflies, and Living Foolproof. Dr. Simoyan strongly believes in the need to transform the way we educate students across the educational spectrum, with a focus on creativity, problem solving and integration of the arts and sciences. She is a 2022–2023 Doximity Op-Med Fellow.

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