Finding My Way

In the summer of 2015, I was experiencing a crisis of purpose. While once I was certain I wanted to become a physician, I had reached an age when my future seemed uncertain. Crisis has a way of helping us discover our paths. Serendipitously, a major health scare helped clarify mine. That summer, I was volunteering and shadowing various operations at a local general hospital near Seoul when there was a major outbreak of Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) in South Korea.

Although the Korean government was aware of MERS’ impact in the Middle East with an official warning from the World Health Organization, it initially failed to contain an infected traveler at the airport. After the first MERS patient was seen by a physician for flu-like symptoms, the physician filed a report to a government health organization about a potential MERS patient. However, the government simply ignored the reports and told the physician to just treat him for flu. To make matters even worse, after MERS-suspected patients were transferred to one of the most prestigious hospitals, the government and hospital executives hid their presence from the general public. They did this to prevent public disorder and negative attention for the hospital, but it ended up causing a critical miscommunication. Many health professionals were not even aware of the MERS-infected patients in their hospital, resulting in the infection of other patients and even health professionals.

From that point on, MERS became viral and dragged Korean society into absolute chaos. Nearly 200 people were confirmed with the infection and more than 30 people had passed away within the first month of the spread (Cowling et al., 2015). Citizens were frightened and infuriated, not only by the MERS, but also by the government’s dishonesty. All the streets, shops, and public transportation in Seoul were emptied and many schools and hospitals were closed. At the hospital where I was volunteering, all entrances were closed except for a small gate so that each person entering could be checked for symptoms. Although there were no actual MERS infected patients at my hospital, I still cannot forget the terrified look on people when someone else had symptoms for MERS (cold-like symptoms). I was sincerely astonished by how the whole country could be impacted by a mere virus brought by one traveler.

Having just graduated from the University of Virginia and losing my grandfather a couple of days after graduation, I was looking forward to spending peaceful time with my family to commemorate the deceased. However, the outburst of MERS pushed Korean society into near anarchy and suddenly changed everything that I had anticipated. On my 13-hour flight back to the U.S., I was deeply disappointed and concerned about how such a horrible outbreak could have happened in one of the most developed countries in the world. While confined in that small seat, my migrating thoughts went back to my childhood.

Growing up as a child of a prominent neurosurgeon and an obstetrician, I was consistently exposed to various medical environments. As a kid, I used to play with different medical toys: stethoscopes to listen to my mother’s heartbeat and a brain model as a three dimensional puzzle. From accompanying my parents to conferences to visiting them at work in hospitals, I had plenty of childhood experiences to steer me toward a medical profession. Still, one of the most influential events occurred when I was in second grade. What started as a simple cold became an excessive inflammation of the middle ear that threatened my hearing. A constant beeping sound and a stunned feeling in my ear made my life a nightmare. Luckily, I was able to fully recover after a long term treatment by one of the most prominent ENT physical groups. The doctors there simply saved my auditory system, but to me, they saved a kid from the deepest abyss in his young life.

However, the primary reason for my decision to study biomedical engineering involved my father. Since my father is a third generation doctor in his family and my great grandfather was a member of the first class of the best medical school in Korea, my father, with a traditional strict Asian mindset, felt great pride in the profession and wanted me to follow in this footsteps.

My father’s will was also facilitated by the Korean education system. In Korea, authority figures give precise instructions for what to do, what to study, and what to accomplish rather than allowing students to freely explore their interests. Additionally, medicine is considered the most prestigious occupation in society and people automatically assume students with good grades should go to medical school no matter what their particular strengths are. Although I even got first place in the Virginia Mathematics League and won various other math competitions when I came to the United States, I was still encouraged by my Korean heritage to become a physician. Consequently, even though I was more interested in majoring in mathematics in college and possibly going into the finance industry, I was still unable to think outside my Korean educational frame and father’s instruction and decided to major in biomedical engineering and go to medical school.

Unfortunately, the road to fulfilling that goal has not been smooth, especially during the transition from the Korean education system to the American system in college. Most of my other biomedical engineering friends had already figured out their own unique paths while I was simply following the traditional Korean steps to become a doctor. Compared to the distinctive and enormous goals of my peers including groundbreaking cancer research or setting up a medical volunteering organization in Africa, my goal to simply become a physician suddenly looked very mundane. I could not think beyond the expectations of a conformist society. Feeling like an outcast within my peer group, I lost my enthusiasm in my junior year and became trapped in the deepest slump, causing academic struggles and a delay in applying to medical school.

This is how the tragedy of the MERS virus in Korea saved me in the summer of 2015. It helped me get back on track and clarify the goal that I had always vaguely had by realizing the importance of an efficient public health system. As one of the most developed countries in the world, Korea already had world-renowned medical professionals, facility, and an efficient insurance system. Nevertheless, a simple miscommunication resulted in such a catastrophe. No matter how much effort individual physicians put into patient care, a disorganized system can render those contributions futile all at once.

What was the main problem of the health system in Korea that failed to prevent the viral outbreak even though it already had all the necessary resources to prevent it? Furthermore, what are the reasons behind other catastrophic outbreaks and what would be the major differences from the circumstances where epidemic diseases were successfully prevented? Since new synthetic chemicals that could be potentially harmful to human health are being developed more than ever and diseases are constantly evolving, our rapidly globalizing world will be at increasingly higher risk of eruption of new epidemics. Exploring various cases of epidemics throughout the world will help us establish more efficient systems to prepare our society for unforeseen consequences in the future. Accordingly, for my literature review, I will analyze and compare two of the recent epidemics, Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS), in the following categories: transmission pattern, geography, demographics, and effect on healthcare personnel.

As the above questions stimulated my interests, I decided that I would like to obtain MD/MPH dual degree and become a pioneer in establishing and maintaining the most effective public health system. While treating individual patients at the micro level, I will also endeavor to improve the efficiency and safety of medical system. With my knowledge and experiences gained through my education and research, I would like to work for World Health Organization to establish an efficient global healthcare system.

Reference

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