

SGIM LEADER OF THE MONTH

Allan Prochazka: the Mentor's Mentor

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People sometimes use the phrase “a doctor’s doctor” to describe someone who is highly respected within his/her profession. We have chosen to write about Allan Prochazka, MD, professor of medicine at the University of Colorado. Allan has been a member of our division of general internal medicine (GIM) for the past 30 years. He has mentored countless faculty in GIM, as well as medical students, residents, and faculty from other departments. He has many traits that allow him to be an effective mentor.

Knowledge. Allan has a unique understanding of evidence-based medicine and statistics in medicine. He understands better than anyone we know how to read medical literature and apply new knowledge to patient care. He teaches these topics to medical students and residents on a regular basis and has the ability to explain concepts simply and clearly so that clinical trainees can use them in their every day practice. Allan has an insatiable curiosity, and his knowledge of topics is deep. He often cites journal articles that many of us would never have known about and has a ready store of articles pertinent to a diverse array of clinical and research questions.

Perspective. Allan reads voraciously. He has read much of medical history to give a longitudinal view of medical knowledge. He loves not only medicine but also statistics, history, art, philosophy, psychology, travel, and languages. (He reads both Greek and Latin, for example.) His office functions as a library for mentees and colleagues—it is hard to have a conversation with him in his office and not take home a copy of a book relevant to the conversation. He brings all of this perspective

into our discussions of medicine and clinical research. He carries a broad-based view on our work as clinicians, educators, and researchers, which allows him to appreciate and effectively critique researchers who are doing all kinds of work from basic science to clinical trials to epidemiology. He brings these outside influences into our meetings in a way that helps mentees to think broadly about the impact of their own work on society as a whole. Perhaps most importantly, he constantly reminds those he mentors to place their academic careers into the broader context of their lives. One mentee recalled how he was quickly whisked out of the hospital when Allan found out it was his wedding anniversary.

Selflessness. Allan is one of those mentors who is always thinking about how to help his mentees—not about how his mentees can help him build his career. He is an extremely selfless person. One of his mentees recalled that they were invited to re-submit a journal manuscript in an abbreviated format, which required reducing the number of authors. Allan insisted that his name be removed as a co-author to make room for the junior faculty, even though he was technically more deserving of co-authorship. After a disappointing educational session from a group of experts during a national meeting, one mentee recalled saying to Allan: “I’ve seen you teach this topic a hundred times, and it is so much better. How come you’re not teaching this session?” The reply from Allan was that he’d rather focus on developing teaching skills in others than recognition for himself. Another mentee noted that, early in a research project, participant incen-

tives were sent out without the correct forms, disallowing costs to be reimbursed by grant funding. Allan paid them out of his own pocket. He is very self-deprecating, despite a distinguished career as a clinician, teacher, and researcher. In fact, he asked that this article not be written about him. (Sorry, Allan, it was long overdue.)

Personable. Allan remembers little things about each mentee—not just the projects. He remembers the stories you tell him about interactions with other colleagues and how these stories are relevant to your goals. Every single faculty member in our division smiles warmly when Allan comes up in a conversation. When you’re talking with Allan you feel like you’re talking with a kind uncle who also happens to be a brilliant doctor.

Accessibility. Allan is one of the most accessible mentors we know. It is clear to all who know him that mentorship is a priority. His door is always open—actually physically open, not figuratively—and he makes himself available to his mentees whenever they need him. Multiple mentees related that although Allan is always busy with patient care and writing grants and papers, he always makes time to answer questions as they arise during the week. Allan is accessible not just academically but interpersonally; despite his senior position in our division of GIM, he considers himself one of the gang. He always participates in social functions within our division, such as our primary care journal club and our morning runs at the national and regional SGIM meeting.

Consistency. Allan has made a remarkable commitment to junior fac-

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ulty development in our division. For example, he is one of a small number of senior faculty members who has attended every regional SGIM meeting throughout his career. He is absolutely committed to mentoring junior faculty in our division and in building relationships within our region to help these junior faculty members with career development. He has placed this priority at or above his own research agenda, and this has led to his position as director of Mentored Scholarly Activity at the University of Colorado.

Humor. Allan has a wonderful sense of humor. As noted, he is a well-rounded person with an interest in disciplines other than medicine. When he teaches, he does so in a humble and humorous fashion, which makes learning easier for trainees. He will often bring in a humorous cultural reference as it relates to a topic that he is teaching or that one of his mentees is pursuing. Allan's sense of humor helps us remember not to take ourselves too seriously as we advance our careers and to avoid those individuals we en-

counter who do take themselves too seriously. He helps us to keep our work in the broader context of increasing knowledge and advancing care for our patients.

Enthusiasm that is infectious. Allan has the remarkable ability to make learning statistics fun. He teaches evidence-based medicine in an ambulatory rotation morning report each month. One mentee related that he has attended this session for the last 10 years—not only because he continues to learn something new but also because of Allan's enthusiasm for the subject. One month he may ask residents to conduct a mini meta-analysis, which gives residents a new understanding of the strengths and pitfalls of lumping studies together. Another month, he may talk about the half-life of medical knowledge, cautioning young physicians not only to avoid being the first to try a new medicine but also to avoid being the last. He injects the talk with fun quizzes on medical history, such as quotations from Sir William Osler and Hippocrates' first aphorism.* He does all

of this while using his dry self-deprecating wit to keep the class entertained. Most importantly, he energizes us all about our profession. He reminds us how lucky we are to be a part of our patients' lives. This great profession allows us—through deliberate practice—to improve our art. Working with him motivates us to be better at everything we do.

Every developing faculty member would be better off with a person like Allan in their corner. Allan is the kind of person who looks out for you and opportunities for you, and this is invaluable. Seek out people like him as you develop your academic career.

Thank you, Allan, from all of us.

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**Vita brevis, ars longa, occasio praeceps, experimentum periculosum, iudicium difficile.* Translation: Life is short, art long, opportunity fleeting, experience perilous, and decision difficult.

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