

On becoming “Dr. Mom”

Jen Williams, BSc PT, MDCM

My son was born at exactly midnight, Oct. 4, 2008. A few hours earlier, I had mentioned to the nurse that the morphine I received had caused some local itching. So when I asked for an additional dose, she refused. I asked that she contact the resident on call, who I knew, and request the additional dose. When she responded in the affirmative, I said, “Oh good, because if you had refused, I was going to teach you something about morphine.” This was to the chagrin of my husband and mother, who rolled their eyes and told me to stop being a doctor.

I cannot stop being a doctor any more than I can stop being a mother since that wonderful night when my son came into this world. These 2 elements, doctor and mother, are part of a greater whole that makes me who I am. I love my son and his father; I love my profession. How do I reconcile the demands of being a resident (who will soon be writing that “little quiz”) with the time my family needs and deserves?

The first academic half-day I attended as a mother was a mere 9 days after my son was born. This was not because I was required to be there — far from it. It was because I wanted to be there. I do not have any extended family in Edmonton, so my fellow residents make up a large part of my social circle. I wanted them to meet my son, and to provide some intellectual stimulation for me. I firmly believe that as parents and as physicians we must first be able to take care of ourselves before we can care for others. When I, as a physician or as a mother, am reasonably well rested and have eaten, drunk, urinated and exercised, I am much better at both roles. By taking care of myself, I am better able to take care of my son, my husband and my patients. I am a better listener, I am more patient and more understanding. So, I went to that half-day to enjoy the social elements and to remember that being intellectually challenged is a part of who I am and need to be in order to be an effective parent.

During the next 6 months I went to more academic half-days with my son in tow. He was passed around the room to other residents who were excited to play with him. I was able to listen and learn while he met my friends. Some days I would even try to read. Most days I just enjoyed him. When he was 3 months old I began doing an extender shift in intensive care every 1–2 weeks. I learned what it was like to be away from my son while also realizing I hadn't entirely forgotten how to take care of sick patients. Thus when it came time to return to work after 6 months of maternity leave, I knew that my son would be fine without me there all day, every day. My husband took over the home front and I went back to work.

What strikes me most is how others are amazed by our choice to split (or share) parental leave. My husband is an individual who works to live. He has taught me much about how to let go of my workaholic tendencies. That said, by the end of 6 months of maternity leave, I wanted to be back at work. I returned feeling a renewed sense of passion for medicine, although at the same time I discovered that I was more than ready to leave at the end of day. Walking in the door each night to my son's smile is now a quick cure for the frustrations I experience in the life of being a resident — frustrations that seemed like insurmountable obstacles before. It's as though my son has given me a suit of armour to protect me mentally and emotionally against the negative aspects of residency. As the new academic year begins and my Royal College exam approaches, I know that home life, studying and work is going to be a juggling act and a constant challenge. However, my love for my son and my family gives me the strength to embark on this journey every day.

Whether you are a man or a woman, the decision to start a family during residency is not one to be taken lightly. That said, most of us in residency are getting older, with credential creep pushing us to be even older

PGY-4, Department of Emergency Medicine, University of Alberta, Calgary, Alta

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before attaining the staff position and feeling the financial security that most of us would prefer to have before starting a family. But age does play a factor in female fertility, and the decision to have children cannot be put off indefinitely. Having a child helps put your goals and ambitions into perspective, and teaches you about partnership and about prioritizing. My son's cries, tears, smiles and laughter give me strength to reach for my books. They let me know when to put them down to join in a family hug. Although having a family does

mean making certain sacrifices, I do not believe that it means you must give up your dreams. You should be able to be the doctor and the parent: two elements that are part of a greater whole.

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Correspondence to: Dr. Jen Williams; jw24@ualberta.ca

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