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Editorial

Working effectively with long-distance mentors' ☆



Great career mentors can change the trajectory of your career; conversely, mentoring others is one of life's most gratifying endeavors. A successful mentoring relationship results in educational, personal, and professional growth for both parties. Seven mentoring models exist: dyad, peer, facilitated peer, speed, functional, group, and distance (Kashiwagi et al., 2013). Many dermatology departments have developed formal internal dyad mentorship programs (faculty–resident, senior faculty–junior faculty) with expectations for face-to-face meetings during the year. However, if you work in a small department or private practice or have certain academic/clinical interests, seeking a mentor outside your daily workplace is often necessary. Most physicians have multiple mentors (Sperduto et al., 2013), and technology has facilitated long-distance mentoring (more recently referred to as telementoring or e-mentoring) via phone, e-mail, and video conferencing (Skype, WebEx, FaceTime). Although there are inherent challenges to the long-distance mentoring relationship (coordinating schedules to regularly communicate, lack of face-to-face time), the different perspectives provided by long-distance mentors outside of your daily practice are valuable, and the distance can be beneficial in certain matters if there are issues that cannot be discussed with one's local mentor(s) (Kim et al., 2013).

Finding long-distance mentors

During my own career journey, I met my long-distance mentors through formal programs, at meetings in my specific field of interest, and also serendipitously. Many mentorship programs in dermatology (Table 1) are available to medical students, residents, and attendings. Early in my career as a cutaneous lymphoma dermatologist, I would have been lost without my long-distance mentors to discuss difficult cases, collaborate on multicenter research projects, and facilitate my involvement in national and international organizations in my field.

I was lucky to participate in the American Academy of Dermatology Academic Dermatology Leadership Program for a 1-year long-distance mentoring program involving monthly 30- to 45-minute phone call meetings. In addition, I have served as a mentor for both the Women's Dermatological Society and Medical Dermatology Society mentorship programs and have hosted several residents and junior faculty for 2- to 4-week in-person rotations with

those interested in learning more about cutaneous lymphomas. Mentees who have rotated with me have come from as far as Puerto Rico, Canada, Korea, and Thailand. Although not formally a requirement of these rotation-based mentorships, long-distance mentoring is a natural extension after such rotations. Based on these experiences, I describe herein general recommendations for building a successful long-distance mentoring relationship.

Building and maintaining the relationship

As outlined by Kim et al. (2013), planning and committing to a regular schedule of communication (for the American Academy of Dermatology Academic Dermatology Leadership Program, 30- to 45-minute monthly phone calls) is key to building the relationship. Initially, the goals of the relationship and framework of the telephone meetings should be agreed upon. Being prepared for meetings with questions/agenda items (circulated in advance, if possible), starting and ending meetings on time, and summarizing discussion points at the end make these meetings more productive and is respectful of the mentor's time. Scheduling the next teleconference at the conclusion of the current meeting is strongly recommended. Confidentiality and trust are essential for any mentoring relationship, and this need is not lessened by being long-distance.

These regular remote meetings should be supplemented with at least one face-to-face meeting (generally at yearly national/specialty meetings). In addition, attending mentee lectures during these meetings is a wonderful way for mentors to show their support and interest, as well as provide feedback (and vice versa).

Several studies have examined factors that correlate with a successful mentoring relationship (reciprocity, mutual respect, clear expectations, personal connection, and shared values), effective mentors (altruistic, active listener, experienced, accessible, approachable), and effective mentees (open to feedback, active listener, respectful, responsible for the relationship) (Straus et al., 2013).

All these factors can come into play during telementoring, but additional considerations specific to telementoring can maximize the benefits. During the teleconferences, both parties should strive to be an active listener and try to avoid interruptions and multitasking. Outside of regularly scheduled telephone meetings, spontaneous e-mails or telephone calls to check in or share news or resources with each other can also strengthen the long-distance relationship. As with any communication via e-mail or phone, be aware of misinterpreting tone in the absence of visual cues and

☆ No human subjects were included in this study. No animals were used in this study.

Table 1

Mentorship programs in dermatology.

AAD Mentorship Program (members)
AAD Academic Dermatology Leadership Program (junior faculty)
AAD Diversity Mentorship Program (medical students)
Journal of the American Academy of Dermatology Editorial Mentorship Program (members)
Women's Dermatologic Society Mentorship Award (residents, junior faculty)
Medical Dermatology Society Mentorship Program (residents, fellows, junior faculty)
American Society of Dermatopathology Mentorship Award (residents)
American Society for Dermatologic Surgery Early Career Preceptorship Program (junior faculty)
American Contact Dermatitis Society Mentoring Award (residents, fellows, junior faculty)
US Cutaneous Lymphoma Consortium Young Physician Mentorship Program (residents, fellows, members)
Council for Nail Disorders Mentoring Award (residents, fellows, junior faculty)
National Psoriasis Foundation Mentor Program (members)

AAD, American Academy of Dermatology.

body language. Whenever possible, use video conferencing or be sure to check in with the other party if unsure of the tone.

Conclusions

All mentoring relationships have a natural life cycle. Some run their course as the mentee's career matures, some may evolve into work collaborations and/or friendships, and others may never fully develop (due to lack of commitment or chemistry, poor communication, perceived [or real] competition or conflicts of interest, or the mentor's lack of experience) (Straus et al., 2013). Long-distance mentoring is like travel, offering unique perspectives from a larger vista but requiring structure and commitment to get the most out of the relationship.

Conflict of Interest

None.

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Study Approval

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