
Finding Work-life Balance The Hard Way

By Erin Norris, MD, FRCPC

I am five months pregnant with my third child, scrolling through patient labs on my office computer. The summer sun streams in from a window on my right side, which must be why I can't see the screen very well. Except that over the next three days, I can see less and less out of my right eye, until I can barely count fingers. The ophthalmology resident on call meets me in the hospital on a Sunday. There is a flurry of specialists, an urgent MRI, and I am diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS). I am fine until I'm not: my daughter is eleven months old, and I develop severe vertigo and ataxia. I can't go to work. I can't even carry my daughter.

MS isn't really that different from any of the chronic, unpredictable diseases that we treat as rheumatologists. There is uncertainty, denial, and fear—a betrayal of the body. There is an indignity, a loss of control, which comes with being a patient. Does all this really make me a better doctor? When I return to work, I am slower, I see fewer patients, and I hold fewer clinics. I stop taking hospital calls, and my colleagues have to pick up the slack. I transfer care of my most acute (dare I say interesting?) patients, and some patients request transfers because they wait too long to see me.

And yet, I listen more. I take more time. I understand the small injustices of being a patient—especially the waiting—and the bigger ones, too. I know deeply that what patients discuss in the physician's office is such a small piece of their illness experience and of their person. So I try to honour this. I try to be the kind of patient advocate I want for myself. And in this way, I bring back my feeling of self-worth as a physician.



Photo credit: Kelly Fischtein

Dr. Norris and her family (pictured from left to right): Her daughter Rebecca, Dr. Erin Norris, her son Judah, her husband Larry, and her daughter Leah.

Here is the truth: I will never be the right rheumatologist for every patient. But I can be a great rheumatologist for some patients. And, by adapting my practice, I have enough left to also be a great wife and mother—because, really, I am the only mother my children have, and my husband's only wife. I never would have chosen this work-life balance, but I can finally say I am grateful for it.

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