Family medicine

Inspired by their grandfather’s legacy, two brothers reflect on their time together in medical school.

BY DOMINIC DECKER AND JOSEPH DECKER

Bunk beds were a staple in our house. These sturdy bedroom fixtures became a symbol of our brotherhood. In a household of five siblings, they represented the daily compromise of shared space. They also were where Joe, being four years older than Dom and having dibs on the top bunk, could display his seniority. Additionally, they were a quiet place where we listened to our father tell us bedtime stories. It was in those bunk beds where we first heard stories about our grandfather, a family physician, whose legacy cultivated our earliest interest in medicine. Now, at the ages of 32 and 28, we are both graduating from the University of Minnesota Medical School, the alma mater of the grandfather we never met.

Charles Decker’s figure loomed large, yet mysterious, over us as children, even though his untimely death when our father was 14 prevented us from personally knowing him. Dr. Decker, as our aunts and uncles reverently called him, was brought to life in stories shared both at bedtime and during family gatherings—stories about house calls he made, babies he delivered, his capable presence in his St. Paul neighborhood.

We learned that Dr. Decker often went out of his way to look after his patients. One story that was passed down was about an elderly patient who was living alone and struggling to care for herself and her home. During a house call, Dr. Decker discovered there was no food in her refrigerator or pantry. He left her, drove to the grocery store and returned with food in hand. This act of kindness revealed much about how our grandfather approached the doctor-patient relationship.

Now more than 75 years after Charles Decker graduated from the University of Minnesota Medical School, we have the privilege of continuing on as the next generation of Drs. Decker.

Growing up, our different ages and interests often led us on divergent paths. We overlapped in grade school for four years, then went on to different middle and high schools. We graduated from high school and eighth grade in the same year. As adolescents preoccupied with our own activities and friends, we didn’t talk much about the future. Yet individually, we were grappling with the question of career. And unbeknownst to each other, we found ourselves recalling stories of Dr. Decker and wondering if medicine might be an option.

It was during college that we each began to feel certain that medicine was the only field that would offer both challenge and fulfillment, although we both completed English degrees. Afterward, Dom worked as an emergency department scribe before earning a master’s degree in narrative medicine. Joe worked as an operating room technician and later in pacemaker and ICD sales for Boston Scientific. During those years, we separately met physicians who inspired and mentored us. Our mutual interest in medicine finally turned into a shared passion.

As we applied to medical schools, we shared MCAT study resources, discussed personal statements and offered support as we waited to hear about admission decisions. On a spring day in 2012, we received telephone calls each within several minutes of the other informing us of our acceptance into the University of Minnesota. Although we had other options, our grandfather’s being an alumnus and the opportunity to go to school together made our decision obvious.

During our first two years of medical school, as we started to build the foundation of our medical knowledge during
countless hours in lecture halls, our relationship as brothers began to blossom. We engaged with one another daily, sharing new knowledge and clarifying difficult concepts, speaking to each other about medicine as only two English majors could.

More importantly, we overcame challenges together. We sat near each other during seemingly endless exams, often exchanging anxious yet reassuring glances before our tests were handed out. After each exam, we were the first to congratulate one another. We felt a great pride in seeing each other succeed, knowing the sacrifice and diligence that goes into each passing grade in medical school. It was like we were once again childhood bunkmates.

The camaraderie brought about by our shared experience in the classroom became the bedrock of our relationship and served us throughout our clinical years as well. We processed countless stories together—both tragic and uplifting—and in doing so have started to learn what it means to be a doctor and practice medicine.

For each of us, our time on the palliative care service at Hennepin County Medical Center stands out. On this rotation, we had the unique opportunity to work with terminally ill patients. Having completed the rotation within several months of each other, we spoke often about the spectrum of emotions that accompany a dying patient and their family. We talked about family meetings, in which acceptance and gratitude prevailed, and also about devastating disease processes that sadly seemed to steal our patients far too quickly.

By processing our own raw emotions with each other, our bond deepened in ways that simply had not been possible before.

The hospital, in the heart of downtown Minneapolis, brought us in contact with a large number of underserved patients. Some brought all of their personal belongings with them in a suitcase. Others didn’t have a safe place to go after being discharged. The experience gave us insight into what our grandfather saw when he opened his patient’s empty refrigerator. And it broadened our understanding of the doctor-patient relationship, an alliance that Charles Decker had artfully mastered decades earlier.

The unique nature of our situation has not been lost on us. We were particularly aware of that on Match Day, as we stood next to each other, envelopes in hand, nervously waiting to find out where we had been placed. When we learned we had both matched into our first-choice programs, we were overcome with happiness for ourselves and for each other. Our mother caught this seminal moment on camera, panning back and forth, somehow perfectly capturing each of our reactions.

Although geography will separate us during residency, the bond we have formed during medical school will continue to sustain us as we each become Dr. Decker. We leave medical school with a transformed understanding of medicine and with a strengthened relationship as brothers and, now, colleagues.

Dominic Decker and Joseph Decker are 2016 graduates of the University of Minnesota Medical School. Both will begin internal medicine residencies in June; Dominic at Brown University and Joseph at the University of Minnesota. As English majors, they considered writing a natural outlet to process their emotions in the quest for a better understanding of themselves and their patients. This essay is their first joint piece of writing.