As nearly 50 medical students file into the lecture hall, Michael Pitt, MD, unpacks the tools of his trade: crayons, otoscope tips, small bottles of soapy water, large clear marbles, quarter-sized rubber squeakers. Their purpose soon becomes clear: Pitt is also a professional magician.

Speaking with the cadence of an entertainer who's spent hours in front of an audience, the assistant professor of pediatrics at the University of Minnesota describes the relationship between magic and medicine as he makes a crayon disappear from his hand and reappear behind his ear, catches a bubble and turns it into a marble, makes an otoscope tip vanish, and causes his knee to squeak every time he bends it. “This became my kid credentials,” he says of the tricks. “I could build instant rapport with patients.”

But teaching first- and second-year medical students to perform magic tricks isn't the point of his lunch-hour talk. Rather, it’s to show these members of the pediatrics interest group how using magicians’ centuries-old tricks of the trade can help them at the bedside.

He explains how to use misdirection (for example, pressing on a child's aching belly with a stethoscope rather than your hand to give the impression that you're listening rather than feeling) and patter (suggesting a disappeared otoscope tip may be in the patient's ear to gain permission to look further). He shows how to give someone the perception they have free will while getting a desired outcome (asking which ear you can look in rather than if you can look in their ears). For this group of future pediatricians, the goal is to get them thinking like magicians so they can get their young patients to cooperate during exams and procedures.

Pitt has been cultivating these skills since he was 8 years old and performed his first magic trick during a talent show on a family cruise. “I bought a deck of cards in the gift shop and asked my dad to teach me a trick I had seen him do. I did it that night and loved being on the stage,” he recalls. When he got home, he read every book on magic at the library and put together an act. He began performing at parties, at the hospital where his mother worked as a nurse and eventually at a restaurant in his hometown,
Sanibel Island, Florida. “I remember telling people I wanted to be a Christian Magician Physician Pediatrician when I grew up. I went four for four on that,” he says.

During medical school at Johns Hopkins and residency at Northwestern University, Pitt began seeing parallels between medicine and magic. “From a child’s perspective, medicine is like magic,” he says, giving the example of how the reduction maneuver can “magically” fix a young child’s dislocated “nursemaid’s” elbow. He says one patient forever called him a wizard after his arm was healed.

He also found research on magic and medicine. In one study, investigators noticed the part of the brain that lights up on fMRI when a patient watches a magic trick is the same part that lights up under general anesthesia. In another, when dentists used magic tricks, procedures and X-rays took less time, and children were less likely to need sedation and had less anxiety. “If I had a pill that did this, it would be malpractice not to use it,” he says.

In addition to speaking to medical students, Pitt has led workshops for pediatric providers at grand rounds and national meetings. “There wasn’t an empty seat in the room,” he recalls of a Pediatric Academic Societies meeting. “A year later, I heard stories from all these people about how they’ve continued to use this with patients.”

Pitt says he only rarely performs magic tricks when he’s with patients but that he thinks like a magician all the time. He does, however, work his magic at home on his own kids, ages 4, 2 and 4 months. “My oldest daughter, Parker, is very intrigued that her daddy is a doctor and a magician,” he says. “She always wants me to make things disappear—like the vegetables on her dinner plate when her mom isn’t looking.”—KIM KISER

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Michael Pitt (left) doing a card trick at the National Kidney Foundation’s annual dinner in Chicago.