

Don't Get Through It, Live It!

An interview with Melissa Joy Thiel, MD

At last year's conference, we asked Dr. Thiel how she achieved balance in her life. She answered, "I have reinvented myself a number of times to adapt to changes in my life." We were intrigued and wanted to know more.

Q: How many years have you been practicing medicine?

I graduated from medical school in 1979, so I guess that's about 26 years.

Q: Tell me about the progression of your career in medicine and the different kinds of work you've done.

I went to college at Lafayette College, on an undergrad scholarship from Harvard Business School, majoring in economics and biology. When I finished, I decided I wasn't really interested in business as a career – I wanted to be a doctor. I wasn't sure how I'd pay for it, so I joined the Army so they could pay for my medical training.

I went to Cornell University for medical school, and did my residency at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, with an OB/GYN specialty. Walter Reed was excellent training! We were able to see the same patients before, during and after surgery, so they really felt like "our" patients.

I then spent five years with the Army in Germany, running an OB/GYN clinic, where we saw 3000 outpatients per month. From there, I went to Ft. Belvoir, which served both military and civilian patients, and trained the OB/GYN, GYN surgery and family practice residents. I really loved teaching!

Upon leaving the military, my husband (who is also a physician) and I had three children. I sensed a lot of resentment from male physicians in private practice. They felt that if I had children or got pregnant again, I couldn't "pull my weight". (Actually, studies have been done that disprove this theory. Women with children often just get more efficient out of necessity!) I ended up starting my own

practice in Alexandria, sharing space with another physician.

Q: What is your current business arrangement?

I started what's called a "joint horizontal venture," opening my own medical practice, but sharing space, supplies and staff with another physician. It was my own corporation, so I could make my own decisions about how much to work. But we covered for each other when we needed to be off. I'm still doing that and it is ideal for me. After eight years, we added another physician.

The business model for medicine is sequential and there are typically no economies of scale – well, maybe in a large group. If you work less, you make less, and to make more, you have to work more hours. Your share of the profit is also dependent on that. It made more sense to me to keep the overhead low and have a little more independence in choosing my lifestyle. And my patients are my patients – there is "ownership" – it's not always like that in a group.

Q: Do you have any business advice, things you've learned the hard way?

Hire people with a strong work ethic who are smart – you can train everything else. Hire staff that can screen calls and visits, and find out what the patient's agenda is. It saves you a lot of time.

Q: I hear you have stopped accepting insurance at your practice. How is that going? What prompted you to do it?



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At this point, I have dropped all insurance contracts. I accept private pay, and my patients submit claims to their insurance company. I've actually been able to reduce my fees by not accepting insurance.

If you provide good care, they'll come back. I had some patients go elsewhere, but most of them came back. I've just had to constantly get back to why I went into medicine. It's about the patient's agenda, not the insurance company's or my own. It's risky – it's not for everyone – but it's been good for me.

Q: Along the way, how did you change your schedule to adapt?

My husband is also a physician and although my debt was minimal, he did have some. Since we had three children, we made some hard choices. We decided to live on one income and be frugal! For about five years, I worked full-time while he stayed home. Once we were both working again, I worked nights so I could see the kids during the day.

We got help; we had someone come in from 2 to 6 p.m. to be with the kids, make sure they did their homework, start dinner, start the wash. The kids did the chores, not the nanny! We committed to family dinners nightly, often by candlelight to make everyone feel special. (This was also very calming for the kids.) I called my family "Team Thiel" – we ALL pitched in.

A wonderful side-benefit was that our children spent time with women from many different cultures, and learned a lot. I quit doing obstetrics because I was on call all the time, and the kids started hiding my beeper. Simply, I was tired, so I quit.

Q: That's a lot of changes. What was it that prompted you to make changes?

Every time I discovered that I didn't like going to work, I made a change. I'd ask myself, "What are you pretending not to know or feel?" We all want to stay in our comfort zone, but if we really pay attention to ourselves, we know we need to make a change. I'd step back and ask, "What do I really want in life?"

Q: What advice would you give to a female physician at the beginning of her career?

I would say to focus on why you're in medicine. Focus on the joy of caring for patients, and choose where you put your energy. Give up perfection. And don't do it alone. Involve your husband, or your children if you have them. They have to help

with what HAS to get done, like laundry, meals, etc. Don't get in debt, or get out of it fast. Drive an old car, have a small home – keep life simple! Step back and ask, "What do I really want in life?" And go away (just with spouse, just you, whatever) – schedule it and do it. And take care of your spiritual self.

“Every time I discovered that I didn't like going to work, I made a change. I'd ask myself, 'What are you pretending not to know or feel?'”

Q: What things have you done to achieve personal growth? Are there any books or seminars you suggest?

One of the best things I've ever done is go to conferences that are not in my specialty, like an internal medicine conference. Specialty conferences got old, I felt like I knew it already. The other conferences broadened my focus and got me re-energized.

And last, find a mentor – older women often make great ones. And it doesn't have to be a doctor.

Q: How do you keep the "fun" in your work?

Do silly things to get your mood up. When I was teaching residents and getting them up at 2:00 am, I'd make them sing "Hi-Ho, Hi-Ho, it's off to work we go" on the way down the hall. When they got to the patients, they were smiling. I also made them keep a yo-yo in their pocket, and asked them to pull it out when they got stressed.

Discover your sense of humor! Try to make every patient laugh. I schedule my favorite patients at the end of the day, so I end the day having fun.

Dr. Gold honored for recent book

Liza H. Gold, MD is the recipient of the 2006 Manfred S. Guttmacher Award for her book *Sexual Harassment: Psychiatric Assessment in Employment Litigation*. This award, co-sponsored by the American Psychiatric Association and the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law, honors the year's most outstanding contribution to the literature on forensic psychiatry.

The award was officially presented on May 21 at the American Psychiatric Association annual meeting in Toronto.

Liza H. Gold, MD, a clinical and forensic psychiatrist, is Clinical Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Georgetown University School of Medicine in Washington DC. She is Associate Director of the Georgetown Psychiatry Residency Program in Psychiatry and Law. Dr. Gold is coeditor of *The American Psychiatric Textbook of Forensic Psychiatry* (American Psychiatric Publishing Inc., 2004). She received her BA from Harvard/Radcliffe College, her MD from New York University School of Medicine, and completed her psychiatry residency training at Boston University.

She is in private practice in Arlington, Virginia.

VCU physicians recognized as "Top Docs"

Several Virginia Commonwealth University Medical Center physicians received high marks from their peers in the latest "Top Docs" survey conducted by Richmond Magazine.

The survey, published in the magazine's April issue, asked 3,322 doctors which specialists in 54 areas of practice they would choose if they or their family needed medical treatment. The following women physicians and their specialties were included in these magazine-designated categories.

- Allergy and Immunology: Anne Marie Irani, MD
- Dermatology: Julia R. Nunley, MD
- Genetics: Joann N. Bodurtha, MD
- Gynecology/Obstetrics (General): Ellen L. Brock, MD
- Gynecologic Oncology: Cecelia Boardman, MD
- Infectious Diseases: Sara Monroe, MD
- Oncology: Mary Helen Hackney, MD
- Plastic/Reconstructive Surgery: Andrea L. Pozez, MD
- Radiology: Ann S. Fulcher, MD
- Rheumatology: Lenore M. Buckley, MD
- Urogynecology: Catherine Matthews Nichols, MD

2006 Women's Conference focuses on communication

Are you frustrated with not having enough time to spend with patients? Is time spent in communications with co-workers that you'd rather use a different way? Do you have a nagging personnel issue that you've been avoiding and need to solve? Do you need new ideas on how to relate more effectively with your colleagues?

Plan now to attend the 2006 MSV Women Physicians' Conference, *Saying "Yes" to the Tough Stuff and "No" When You Need To*. The one-day conference will be held Friday, September 29, 2006 at Maggiano's Little Italy in Richmond. CME's will be available for this conference, and the cost for members is only \$50.

The day will start with two sessions by professional

speaker and life coach Margie Warrell. Her topics are *Success is a Balancing Act* and *Courageous Conversations*. In these fun and highly interactive presentations Margie shares entertaining stories of her "balancing act" as a working parent along with fresh ideas and practical strategies for designing a work/life balance.

You will learn the myths about "life balance," the key to managing commitments and avoiding overload and burnout, and how to say no with more grace and less guilt.

Margie will teach strategies for managing your own emotions and responding powerfully and how to bridge the "communication gap" between what is

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being said and what is being heard to avoid misunderstanding.

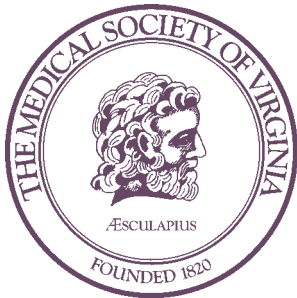
After lunch and networking with your peers, the afternoon will be spent in a problem-solving mode. The first session will be *Leading Successfully with Physicians & Office Staff*, followed by a panel discussion and Q&A session, *Managing Sensitive Human Resource Issues*. You will learn to identify sensitive staff issues and methods of resolving them, how to navigate areas of conflict between physicians, and how to respond to human resource issues in a consistent and fair manner.

You will also learn to identify the key leadership skills of physicians and how to apply them to your practice, and to distinguish between the operational responsibilities of the office manager/administrator and the lead physician. Case studies will be used to demonstrate principals of effective leadership.

For more information or to obtain a registration form, go to www.msv.org (Click on Events and Seminars) or call (800) 746-6768, ext. 1050



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