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Bruce Y. Lee Contributor

I cover the intersection of business, health and public health.

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Study Shows That Doctors Make Better Hospital Leaders



CEO of Johns Hopkins Medicine, Paul Rothman, M.D. (L), and Mayo Clinic CEO John Noseworthy, M.D., are examples of two physicians who run health systems that consistently rank among the top in hospital rankings such as the U.S. News and World Report. (Photo: DON EMMERT/AFP/Getty Images)

Have you ever watched CBS' television show *Undercover Boss*? Each episode, a company's CEO dons a disguise to work incognito among the company employees. Each episode concludes with the CEO realizing how much he or she has to learn and how things need to change, followed by a series of heartwarming scenes: the CEO and employees crying, people cheering and applauding, dogs and cats hugging each other, sugarplum fairies and a dramatic heartwarming soundtrack. The lesson? To effectively lead an organization, you have to actually truly understand the people in your

organization and what they do.

So, who's better at running a hospital: a doctor or someone who has never really taken care of patients? Take a wild guess at the answer provided by a *Harvard Business Review* article entitled "[Why The Best Hospitals Are Managed by Doctors](#)." In the article, James K. Stoller, Amanda Goodall and Agnes Baker mention that physician-run hospitals topped [the U.S. News and World Report rankings](#) and earned ~25% higher quality scores than non-physician-run hospitals, according to a [study published in Social Science & Medicine](#). They also cite [a study](#) that found that hospitals in multiple countries (Brazil, Canada, France, Germany, India, Italy, Sweden, the UK and the U.S.) that had more clinically trained managers, in turn, had significantly higher management scores.

Is this really any surprise? Imagine trying to coach a team or come up with new plays when you never actually played the sport. Or conducting an orchestra if you can't read or play any music. Or starting Microsoft or Apple if you had never ever written any computer code...unlike [Bill Gates](#) and [Steve Jobs](#). Then imagine a leader of your hospital trying to take care of patients...because last I checked that's what hospitals do. Of course, physicians are not the only people who take care of or understand patient care. But how effectively can someone who doesn't really understand patient care really run a hospital?

And hospitals are very complex organizations. Ever hear the saying that managing certain organizations is like herding cats? Well, managing a hospital is like herding cats who collaborate with cats around the world, are actually paid by outside cats, use products developed by cats, deal with policies designed by cats and are taking care of other cats who can

also hire cats to sue your hospital. Furthermore, these cats are dealing with exceedingly complex products, services, problems and issues that have cat and death implications. Anyone who has not worked at the on-the-ground level in a hospital may easily underestimate the differences between running a hospital and running anything else. For example, a healthcare consultant who came up through the fast food industry once asserted to me that running a hospital is like running a McDonald's, except instead of customers you have patients and instead of burgers you have medications and other medical treatments. I don't know what the consultant orders when she goes to McDonald's or what she does with the burgers...but, no, they are far from being the same.

By the time a physician has finished medical training, he or she has had *at least* three years of intense experience caring for a wide variety of patients, *at least* five years of navigating through hospital systems and working directly with personnel throughout the hospital, and *at least* seven years learning about the body, medicine and medical technology. Add on more years if the physician has had additional training and time practicing. Keep in mind that in the medical field, the word "training" often means work. The word "practice" also means work. The word "resident" means work multiple jobs for little pay. The word "attending" means work multiple jobs for more pay. In fact, the word "time off" sometimes means work too. The medical field has lots of euphemisms for the word "work." Therefore, by the time a physician has become an attending, he or she has had many, many years of work experience in healthcare settings. That kind of experience just can't be learned from a website, an app, a book, a television show or even from watching others do the work.





How much potential hospital leadership talent is being overlooked among doctors? Is the lack of training, encouragement and opportunities holding them back? (Photo: Shutterstock)

Moreover, working in medicine hones numerous other hospital leadership skills such as:

- **Remaining calm under duress:**

Next time you make a big decision, try not sleeping for 24 hours, have people run around and yell at you, surround yourself with machines that beep every ten seconds and throw around some vomit, diarrhea and blood. Oh, and try to keep everyone else around you calm as well, including the person vomiting.

- **Communicating with a wide variety of people in a wide variety of circumstances:** See above. Also, convincing people to not hurt themselves or run out of the hospital naked requires more than just “small talk.”

- **Making decisions quickly with limited information:** If a patient is bleeding out, you can't say, “Hmm, let's see what the data shows,” or, “Let's form a committee to decide what to do.”

- **Multitasking constantly:** I knew a doctor who would eat lunch and talk on the phone while on the toilet to save time. I did not enjoy phone conversations with him.

- **Having patience and taking the long view:** Doctors are the kings and queens of delayed gratification:

A medical school classmate who wanted to become a neurosurgeon once told another classmate of plans to hold off on dating until finishing training. Yes, folks, that's "I would love to go out on a date with you, how about Tuesday in a decade?"

- **Taking responsibility:** Doctors are ultimately responsible for the care that patients receive.
- **Exhibiting empathy and compassion:** Seeing suffering at its worst makes you realize that so much in life is due to good or bad luck.

Of course, not all physicians are meant to be hospital leaders. In fact, many don't want to assume such a role. This isn't saying that only doctors can run hospitals effectively or that being a doctor necessarily makes one a good hospital leader. For example, to be a hospital leader, a physician has to understand and appreciate the business side of healthcare. You can't have a hospital leader say, "Medications for everyone! We'll worry about paying for it later!" And some doctors have the wrong personalities and the wrong motivations. But physicians are a diverse lot, and the talent and potential are out there. Stereotypes of physicians (e.g., physicians are supposed to just see patients) and the lack of training, encouragement and opportunities may be holding some physicians back. Maybe it's time to uncover the leadership talent that remains under covers.

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