

Ethics and Wellness: The Dignity of Failure in Academic Neonatology

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Academic Neonatology is a demanding and deeply rewarding calling and vocation. However, successful neonatal medicine practitioners confront their share of challenges. Opportunities for leadership, teaching, grant funding, and innovation abound, yet fierce competition often marks the path and may distract from dedicated care of infants and their families. With more qualified candidates than leadership positions available, failure is not just possible but predictable. It is a shared experience, an inevitable part of both an academician's and clinician's journey. Nevertheless, failure in Neonatology or any other medical discipline need not be a mark of shame or despair. It can and should be faced with dignity and learned gracefully.

“Alexander Graham Bell's quote, ‘When one door closes, another opens; but we often look so long and so regretfully upon the closed door that we do not see the one that has opened for us,’ highlights the fact that new opportunities emerge even in the face of setbacks. However, dwelling on past losses may prevent us from recognizing these new opportunities.”

We are often comforted by aphorisms like “FAIL is a First Attempt at Learning” or “END is Effort Never Dies.” While these sentiments offer a positive outlook, they can oversimplify the complexities of failure. Sometimes, success is not just delayed—it is unattainable in a particular context. Alexander Graham Bell's quote, “When one door closes, another opens; but we often look so long and so regretfully upon the closed door that we do not see the one that has opened for us,” highlights the fact that new opportunities

emerge even in the face of setbacks. However, dwelling on past losses may prevent us from recognizing these new opportunities. (1)

“The first step is acceptance. Failure is not a referendum on one's value as a person or as a learned professional. It is an inevitable part of a competitive and evolving academic landscape. In moving forward with dignity, academic Neonatologists are cautioned to resist the impulse to externalize blame or failure in achieving specific goals.”

The first step is acceptance. Failure is not a referendum on one's value as a person or as a learned professional. It is an inevitable part of a competitive and evolving academic landscape. In moving forward with dignity, academic Neonatologists are cautioned to resist the impulse to externalize blame or failure in achieving specific goals. Instead, be inwardly critical—continue to learn—but never destructive. Analyze what went wrong with honesty and candor, but do not allow self-criticism to devolve into self-loathing. The courage to ask for feedback from someone following rejection is a difficult step. Honest feedback is a valuable gift that people rarely get. “Why didn't I get the position? What can I do to put myself in a better position to get a job?” are important questions that must be humbly asked and processed. Looking inside is an important step. However, external feedback can expose blind spots. As Robert Francis Kennedy (RFK) stated, “Only those who dare to fail greatly can ever achieve greatly.” (2)

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Just as important as self-reflection is our response to those who succeed where qualified candidates fall short or fail in their selection for leadership. While everyone is entitled to celebrate their accomplishments, failures should not define or limit the passion of a committed physician; instead, they should offer a learning opportunity. In our small world of academic Neonatology, today's competitor is often tomorrow's collaborator. Academic neonatologists are advised to resist the urge to let envy or

bitterness cloud judgments, as the most committed clinician, unfortunately, confronts failure when a baby can not be cured. Acknowledging others' success is not just a sign of strength but a testament to the shared journey of the passion to excel while accepting the limits of our knowledge. While disappointment and unfavorable outcomes are natural events, these failures should never let it be a defining outward expression. There is no failure until you give up. Failure is a key part of the journey to success.

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Failure also offers an opportunity to refocus on activities that bring joy and fulfillment outside professional ambition, fully understanding that everyday decisions are focused on our passion to cure. Whether it is spending time with family, engaging in a hobby, or contributing to the community in another capacity, these pursuits remind us that our identity and value are not limited to professional achievements.

Finally, keep perspective. What may feel like an insurmountable setback today may pave the way for tomorrow's unexpected opportunities. Trust that there is more than one path to a fulfilling career and a meaningful life. The passion for curing our vulnerable patients must sometimes be focused on re-energizing our passion for our profession.

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Failure is not the end; it is part of the journey, our avocation, and our calling. When faced with grace, humility, and a willingness to learn, we transform failures and setbacks from a stumbling block into a stepping stone. In academic Neonatology, as in life, dignity in the face of failure is not just a measure of success but a

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