

Back in the days before GPS, I eagerly served as a “map-reader” during our family road trips. Being able to figure out the correct path and then guiding others in the right direction seemed intrinsically rewarding. I enjoyed it so much that I often fantasized about becoming a professional navigator! As strange as it may seem, I feel that this deep-seated ambition to serve as a guide has ultimately found expression in my passion for pathology. Similar to studying a map and instructing a driver, a pathologist performs the vital role of uncovering diagnostic evidence and guiding clinicians in the right direction.

The medical school that I attended incorporated core pathology coursework. While completing this requirement, my eyes were unexpectedly opened to a new world. I realized that, unlike some of my peers, I thoroughly enjoyed the challenge of finding aberrations from the normal histology under the microscope. Around the same time, I experienced the impact of pathology from the patients’ side. My father was diagnosed with Lambert-Eaton syndrome, and we were worried about a possibility of underlying cancer. Finding the answer required a definitive pathology diagnosis. I saw clearly and intuitively that the pathologist was a quintessential “map-reader,” who deciphered the subtle clues to provide vital guidance to my father’s doctor. Then, it became clear to me that pathology was not only compelling to me personally but was also one of the backbones of quality medical care. Sadly, I lost my father before a definite diagnosis was rendered. Having experienced the first-hand feeling of waiting for a diagnosis strengthens my determination to pursue pathology as my profession and to excel in this field, so that I will be able to help discover the answers that so many other patients are seeking.

After graduating from medical school, students in my home country of Iran are required to undertake two years of social service. I chose to serve in one of our most impoverished providences, recognizing that it would be a valuable opportunity to expand my horizons and assist individuals who were in need. In this role, I not only saw patients for medical reasons, but also provided basic necessities and social services, such as finding milk for mothers who could not afford to feed their babies. In response to this need, with the help of friends and family, I created a fund-raising webpage that became instrumental in helping 112 infants receive healthy formula throughout their crucial first year of life.

After I completed my social service, I decided to pursue my passion for pathology in the U.S., where I could learn the latest advancements in the field and apply them in patient care. Unfortunately, just as I arrived in the U.S. the COVID-19 pandemic began. Faced with financial difficulties, I began working as a pharmacy technician while studying for my USMLE exams. This job provided me with a fantastic opportunity to communicate regularly with doctors and patients. As a result, I became much more confident in my ability to navigate the system and provide essential professional advice.

Eventually, I was able to begin my observerships in the U.S., which further expanded my horizons and helped me become familiar with pathology operations in an academic medical center, such as analyzing cytology slides, managing blood-bank supplies, and evaluating FNAs at patients’ bedsides. As I now look forward to entering a pathology residency program, I feel a great deal of excitement at the prospect of continuing to improve my knowledge while contributing to high-quality patient care. I am also enthusiastic about the tremendous teaching opportunities in this field, because I believe that the most precious aspect of knowledge is that it can be spread and shared. If there is one thing I would want to tell other interested students up-front, it is that the role of the map-reader is just as important as the role of the driver.