



Editorial

Retirement

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I retired from clinical practice on January 31, 2021. Since then I have come to realize just how emotive a topic retirement is. Many people do not even like to use the word. First, let me tell you my story.

I have had a very successful, very satisfying, and very busy academic career. During my career, and particularly in the latter part of it, I was often asked how long I would continue to practice. My answer was “As long as it’s fun.” I used to travel extensively for work and enjoyed it. Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) stopped that. I used to enjoy going to work, chatting with colleagues, having lunch or coffee with them. COVID-19 stopped that. I used to enjoy going in and out of colleagues’ rooms in the operating room, just to see what they were doing and to chat. COVID-19 stopped that. I used to enjoy my clinic every week where I would see patients and their families, as well as interacting with clinic staff. COVID-19 stopped that. My routine changed. I would go to work in the morning in scrubs. In the operating room, I did my list, which now just consisted of urgent cases that could not wait. I would go to my office and look after e-mails and whatever administrative work needed to be done. Then I would go home, get in the shower, and change into sweats. The next day would be exactly the same. Work was no longer fun. My wife, who is also a physician, felt the same and we decided it was time to retire. We had long ago planned to retire to the sun and we did exactly that.

Since I retired people have asked all sorts of questions. “How do you know you have enough money to retire?” “How are you going to fill your time?” “Won’t you miss operating?” People are obviously afraid of the prospect. A few people told me that they had retired but were bored and went back to work. I was very much aware of wanting to quit while I was on top of my game. During my career, I have seen several people who just stayed on too long and became objects of pity or snide amusement. I did not want that to happen to me. I live by the adage that it’s better to be asked why you retired rather than being asked when are you going to retire.

I can understand people’s reluctance to retire. This is a phenomenon that we see across all occupations but appears

to be more frequent among high achievers, as most of us plastic surgeons are. There is a lot of literature on retirement. It ranges from simple retirement tips, to financial strategies, to learned volumes on the psychology of retirement. One of the big fears that people have is loss of identity. We spend our lives building up our professional identity. To a greater or lesser extent, it defines who we are and it can be difficult to walk away from. Many of us also have the feeling that we are the best and the world will stop if we stop, or that “my patients need me.” The sad fact is that the vast majority of us are average and the number of people who are irreplaceable, and there are some, are very few. Even those few may be matchless and exceptional but they are not irreplaceable.

Another maxim that is thrown about is that it is important to retire to something, not from something. I think this is true and when I think about those few people who told me that they went back to work because they were bored. I realize that all of them have no interest outside of plastic surgery or have a huge ego or both! Interests are individual. Some people play golf, some travel, many already have a bucket list that they start to work on. Some take up new careers. For me, I walk every day with my wife, I garden, I cook, I play music, I read voraciously. The day is not long enough. I am also fortunate that I have been able to transition away from clinical practice by writing about plastic surgery. Since retiring I have been working on updating several textbooks that I have edited in the past. This keeps me in touch for now but is becoming less important as time elapses. I thought I would miss operating but, much to my surprise, that has not been an issue. I encourage you all, no matter what stage of your career, to think about retirement. Make sure you will be secure financially by paying attention to issues like pension planning, retirement savings, and investments. Develop interests outside of surgery. Remember you may need plastic surgery, but it will continue to advance without you.

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