

Article Title: A Journey Toward Becoming an Advocate, from the Perspective of a Sponge

Student Name: Dan Pacella

Year of Graduation: 2028

Name of Interviewees: Nathalie Moise, Ross Frommer

Title and Department Affiliation of Interviewees:

Nathalie Moise: Internist, Associate Professor of Medicine, and Director of Implementation Science Research (the Im_Sci Lab) at the Center for Behavioral and Cardiovascular Health

Ross Frommer: Vice President for Government Affairs, Columbia University Irving Medical Center

Like a lot of other people in their 20s, I sometimes feel like I've spent much of the last decade following a standard routine. In my case, that usually means showing up to whatever is the class-, discussion-, or lecture-du-jours, to inch myself closer toward becoming a practicing physician. What gets me out of bed each morning is the prospect that I might learn something that day that my peers and I can ponder and eventually transform into something that alleviates human suffering and improves people's lives. Even more exciting is the fact that I'll get to talk with the brilliant-minded, passionate educators that relay such knowledge to me. In other words, I've been a sponge for about the last decade. I try to soak up, as much as I can, the facts and theories that govern the natural and social world around me, as they pour out of PowerPoint slides and textbooks. I couldn't be more grateful for the privilege I've had to be a sponge.

I believe that any privilege comes with a responsibility to translate it into action. To continue with my analogy (which I apologize for if it's getting corny), I need to wring out the sponge somehow. In addition to hopefully providing impactful care to my patients someday, another way to transform knowledge into action is advocacy. I've learned about the tremendous ability of policies and laws to affect people's lives, just as much as the most powerful forces of biology and disease. This past spring, when the pursuit of scientific knowledge broadly came under siege by the federal government, I realized that being a sponge is well within my comfort zone. What's been outside my comfort zone, and quite intimidating to me, is the world of politics and making my voice and ideas perceived by the masses.

The cognitive dissonance that arose from this finally led me to take a baby step: I reached out to Nathalie Moise, a cardiologist at Columbia who has made an impressive career as a young scientist and advocate. I had read her paper, *A Narrative Review of the Association Between Depression and Heart Disease Among Women: Prevalence, Mechanisms of Action, and Treatment*, and was struck by the work's combination of scientific rigor and call for justice. The paper makes an astounding claim that women with coronary heart disease, a disease in which blood vessels supplying the heart muscle do not function properly, are more likely than men with this disease to develop depression. This phenomenon may result in a higher risk of death for women with heart disease, as well as an additional hurdle for them to seek treatment.

I asked Dr. Moise about how her own personal relationship with advocacy, as well as what brought her to her area of research. In her words, “Science is advocacy. You’re trying to improve a problem in a population that would otherwise be ignored.” Her research on the intersection of heart disease and depression is considered implementation science, which she thinks of as “a subtle, quiet form of advocacy.” By pursuing research that aims to support vulnerable and overlooked populations, she is “bringing people of these communities to the table who would not otherwise have a seat.” She encouraged me, simply by highlighting the power that science, something I am already passionate about, inherently has. That is, “It allows one to advocate, on behalf of their own patients, by addressing things that seem unfair and by seeking out solutions that are generalizable or that impact an entire population.”

The bounty that my meeting with Dr. Moise yielded was encouraging. I felt like I’d taken an important step toward becoming an advocate by speaking with her. My idealization was really put to the test when my university directly became the subject of criticism and punishment by the government. It has been difficult for me to witness the anxiety and uncertainty that has radiated from those bright minds I mentioned, the ones who usually project hope, certainty, and promise for the benefit and necessity of good science and medicine for a better world. I am somewhat ashamed to admit some of my early lamentations, in the face of federally funded grants for my own research involvements being canceled: “What a shame and stroke of bad luck that this is happening during my first year as a student. Out of any place that I could’ve up and moved to for the major life event that is medical school, why must the place I chose be the one that is being turned upside down?”

Something that caught my anxious eye was the title of a workshop that was held at Columbia in April, called “Advocacy Workshop: Turning Science and Beliefs into Policy”. It seemed as if this session was targeted toward me and my fellow sponges, and that it was serendipitously being offered at just the right moment. I signed up and attended the session, where Attorney Ross Frommer, Columbia’s Vice President for Government Affairs, gave a presentation on effective lobbying. Ross shared his lessons from several years working as a lobbyist, and what I took away is that making progress is all about building rapport with others. It may seem difficult in today’s world, but Ross was insistent that there’s something to be said for the benefit of having a

conversation, acknowledging others' concerns, displaying empathy, and appealing to one another's humanity. This is nearly identical to the skills and attitudes I strive for when providing compassionate patient care.

I hope that my journey from sponge to beginner-advocate can resonate with anyone who is passionate but wondering about how to turn their ideas and passions into action. My advice: fall back on the qualities and knowledge that you already possess. For me, that meant seeking out the wisdom of courageous and experienced people whenever I had the chance as I had been doing; always asking questions and pursuing research opportunities to improve the health of overlooked populations; and finding parallels to providing quality care to patients. While my life circumstances and context will certainly not be the same as yours, I would encourage you to leverage your strengths, have confidence in yourself, and not give in to despair. Our world needs you.

Reference:

Moise N, et al. A Narrative Review of the Association Between Depression and Heart Disease Among Women: Prevalence, Mechanisms of Action, and Treatment. *Curr Atheroscler Rep*. 2022; 24(9):709-720. doi:[10.1007/s11883-022-01048-0](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11883-022-01048-0)