



John J. Cangelosi, MD

Rising to the Occasion

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John J. Cangelosi, MD, was a fourth-year resident at the University of Texas Medical Branch (UTMB) at Galveston when a friend suggested that he apply to work weekends at the county jail. The idea was intimidating, but he had enjoyed a senior family practice rotation at the jail during medical school, so he decided to give it a try.

“The job was general medicine, a way to keep my skills,” he says. “They always have two physicians on, so I referred to my co-doc for a lot of help at the beginning. It was pretty scary at the start, but after a while it became comfortable. You find that common things happen very commonly.”

Dr. Cangelosi, who chairs the CAP Residents Section, is now a fellow in dermatopathology at UTMB-Galveston. He was chief fellow in surgical pathology at the University of Texas MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston until last month.

Dr. Cangelosi’s weekends at the jail revealed strengths and aptitudes that he didn’t know he had. “It worked out really well because I created a lot of relationships with all types of residents and physicians,” he says. “I worked with internists, cardiologists, radiologists, plastic surgeons, general surgeons—a hodgepodge of different specialties. When I had a question about specific management, I had a nephrology or cardiology or ID fellow that I could ask; and they in turn would consult me for lab stuff—how to interpret a lab report, what is the best test to order for certain conditions, and what to do if a lab result didn’t correlate with the clinical picture. I felt I really added value to this small microcosm of medicine and contributed as equally to the team as others I worked with. I’ve become a better-experienced physician overall and made some close friends in that environment that I will draw upon for knowledge when I enter practice.”

He learned more than hands-on general medicine, Dr. Cangelosi says. “Number one, I learned a lot about myself, how I could handle uncertainty and unfamiliar situations and truly rise to the occasion,” he says. “I learned that knowing what you don’t know is more important than knowing what you do know. When I didn’t know, I went straight to the specialists; and by becoming friends, we brought a team effort to patient care. I felt extremely proud of the medical treatment we were giving these patients because it was excellent care. We were putting it all together and the best thing was being done for the patient. We were making a difference. That was a pretty good feeling.”

His part-time job at the county jail was high stress in the beginning (on his first night an inmate suffered a heart attack), but it ended on a high note on one of his last nights, when he was sitting beside an older internist while the two wrote up their notes. “I was writing this long note about a complicated patient,” Dr. Cangelosi says. “He looked over and said, ‘That’s a long note,’ so I showed it to him. After he read it, he said, ‘Wow, you might be a pathologist but this note was written by an internist.’”

“I felt at that point more confident than ever before,” Dr. Cangelosi says. “Instead of feeling outside the circle, I felt a part of it. At that point we were true colleagues who related and talked the same language. It was a great feeling.”

“My mom preaches that success is a result of one’s desire,” Dr. Cangelosi says. “Sometimes I roll my eyes when she talks, but I came out of that thinking that it’s true. You will be as successful as you allow yourself to be. To achieve our goals, we have to boost the confidence of our specialty. We need to understand and stress the value we add to patient care. By doing this, we build a better pathologist, we build a better physician, and ultimately we build a better person. Our whole profession elevates and everybody benefits.”

Dr. Cangelosi plans to open his own private laboratory after completion of fellowship, but he has a few thoughts for future residents about experiences in training.

“If I were a department chair, I would make every fourth-year pathology resident work at some sort of general medicine clinic to get an idea of what it’s like,” Dr. Cangelosi concluded. “They would gain the confidence they need to enter a health care market where demands are always changing. They would learn that no matter what was thrown their way, they could rise to the occasion.”