

# Q U E R Y

---



I work too much. Or so my wife says, repeatedly. Of all the things we argue about nowadays — repairing the car versus getting a new one; renovating the basement versus buying a new house; me cooking versus her cooking, or doing the dishes, or getting our five-year-old ready for bed — it is work that causes the cataclysmic battles, the raucous disputes, the greatest acrimony. It's understandable: a dirty dish isn't as dramatic as a lonely winter's night.

I work a full five-day week at my clinic, plus one-in-five call, plus once- or twice-weekly emergency department shifts. At least, that's all I'm supposed to be doing. When anyone asks me if I could possibly cover their call day or emergency shift, I habitually say yes. I tell myself that I do this so that, should the situation be reversed, I could ask one of my colleagues to cover a shift and my exemplary record of service would make it impossible for them to refuse.

But this mode of thinking is gradually being worn down by my wife's force of argument: she asks if I ever *do* ask someone else to cover my shifts, and I say no; she asks if I think my home life is important, and I say yes; she asks if I should begin placing a premium on it over making my colleagues happy, and I say yes again. But then the next doctor comes along and asks if I can cover Friday, and I feel obligated to say yes. Again.

Why obligated? Why can't I say no? I suppose there is a certain amount of people-pleasing involved. Certainly, I don't want to make enemies at work. But I'm beginning to recognize — thanks to my wife's pointed ques-

tioning — that even this kind of thinking is skewed: it shouldn't be about making friends or enemies, it should be about having a balanced, healthy life.

But the other part of the equation is that I *love* my work. I like diagnosing, I like treating, I like the practice of medicine, and perhaps I feel needed in a way at work that I do not at home. Although I recognize that, by feeling this way, by preferring work, I might actually be preempting a rewarding home life where I would be needed and wanted more. Who can maintain a marriage and fatherhood from a hospital call room and its bedside phone?

And what's the benefit of my workaholicism? So far it's given me strained family relationships and an overwhelming amount of hospital responsibility. I enjoy being a doctor, but I wonder if that enjoyment has devoured other forms of pleasure; and when I think of things from my wife's point of view — being married to a guy who's "never home," who brings his work home with him every night and who, when he actually *is* home, gets calls at odd hours and has to leave — I see the toll my inability to say no has taken.

I will try to say no more often, because I don't think I can bear looking at my wife when I miss another day in her life, when I'm woken up to see another patient on a night off, when I can't be there for another of my daughter's games or practices. I fear the look: it once was anger, but has passed into sadness and a single, unspoken question: Is this what I want to be doing with my life?

— Dr. Ursus

Anson Liaw