What I love about nuclear medicine

By: Skylar Etten

When I first got out of high school, I did not have a clue what I wanted to do. After a long summer of stress over the next school year, I decided I would major in psychology. It didn't take long for me to figure out that psychology wasn't the field for me. This left me feeling uneasy about the future of my education. I have long dreaded the question "what are you going to do with your life", and the awkward explanation that follows. Fortunately, this question is what sent me on my journey to nuclear medicine in the first place. I had been working in a pharmacy as an inpatient pharmacy technician and one day my coworker was inquiring about what my plans for my future were. After I gave her a genuine response about how I didn't really know what I wanted to do with my education, she started listing off different career paths. I liked the sound of radiology related fields because of my deep interest in chemistry and anatomy. I was able to get a job shadow in the department of radiology at the hospital I worked at. During my job shadow I was pushed to the side due to the busy nature of general radiology. I felt in the way and couldn't wait to move on to the next thing. After going through CT, I was entertained but still felt like a nuisance. A trip through ultrasound showed me that I wasn't cut out to be a sonographer. After a few hours I thought I had seen it all. They asked me if I wanted to see their nuclear medicine department before I left. To this point in my life, I had never heard the term 'nuclear medicine', however I was about to find one of the most interesting careers I'd ever see. When I entered the small room behind the reception desk, I found a single technologist sitting in front of a computer watching a podcast and drinking coffee. I sat in the chair next to him and introduced myself. I was shown a brief overview of nuclear medicine. He showed me the scan of the patient he was currently in a study with and explained the complex details about the drugs used and the

indication for the study which was a GI bleed. I was instantly captivated by the field because of how different it was from everything I had just seen. The fact that it delt with radioactive tracers that could be manipulated to go certain places in the body to view the anatomy or physiology of an organ system was so mind-blowing to me. After a job shadow at another hospital in the area and then another job shadow at The University of Iowa, I knew that this was what I wanted to do in the future.

After completing the required courses, I finally applied to the nuclear medicine program at the University of Iowa. After submitting my application, I had a surface level online interview with some of the individuals in charge of the program. After this I anxiously waited a month to see if I was able to get into the program. I vividly remember receiving the email at 2pm on a Friday. I was so nervous opening the email to see the result. I was incredibly excited when I saw that I was accepted into the program. My mind instantly went to what the experience in the program was going to be like along with all the interesting things I would be able to do in nuclear medicine. When I started the program about a month and a half ago, I realized just how complicated the field was. From new research to theragnostics, I was baffled at how these people could keep track of it all. As I started to get into the clinic more and genuinely learn about the science of the machines along with the nature of the scans involved, I was hooked.

My true love for nuclear medicine is the ability for the field to grow. I'm from Cedar Rapids Iowa, and here our nuclear medicine is very surface level, only focusing on some stat procedures and the normal 'bread and butter' scans. When I started at the University of Iowa, I learned just the large difference between the patient population but more interestingly the amount of research in the medical field the university is currently conducting. This research has the potential to help countless individuals treat their diseases with innovative science. Another

reason I love nuclear medicine is because of the patients. I've learned the harsh reality that there are many sick people in the world. In just the past month I have seen multiple scans that reveal an unsettling metastasis or a show some indication of a chronic illness. There isn't much I can physically do to help these patients, but I am motivated to provide them quality and care accompanied by a sense that I am invested in their health. It's too often patients are treated like a customer or a bother in healthcare, but I strive to make them feel cared about and assured that they will get the care they need.

Nuclear medicine has major potential to become a bigger part of the healthcare system, and I can't wait to see what the future holds regarding the field. The studies that come out each month are proof that the individuals within the field are supplying enough effort to push it to places which I had never previously though it could be. Its exciting to think I will have the opportunity to participate in the rise of nuclear medicine. Every day when I'm walking to school, I look at the hospital and think of the vast potential my future has because of nuclear medicine and it reminds me how far my education has come to get to this point. Above all else nuclear medicine has given me a sense of self purpose. As previously mentioned, I have always enjoyed chemistry, which shockingly isn't something that everyone wants to talk about. However, I can now feel a sense of joy knowing I get to use my love for chemistry and healthcare to help patients get their disease diagnosed or treated. The amount of joy I feel telling other people the work I get to do at school along with my personal excitement for the future of my career motivates me to be a bigger part of the field after I graduate. I'm continuously learning about opportunities and branches in the field that involve research, and I hope to one day be a part of it.