

A calling to serve, lead, and lift others

By Lauren Byrd

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For Diana Khalil, MD, medicine has never been simply a profession. It is a calling — one rooted in service, shaped by resilience, and centered on caring for people during some of the most vulnerable moments of their lives.

A hospice and palliative care physician practicing in Fort Myers, Dr. Khalil specializes in pain management for patients facing life-threatening conditions. She is also a member of the FMA's Women in Medicine Committee, which supports female physicians as they navigate specific professional concerns.



Those roles share common threads: showing up for others, recognizing their individual experiences and making difficult paths a little easier to navigate.

Shaped by service

Dr. Khalil's journey to medicine began early. Encouraged by her parents and inspired by an aunt and uncle who were both physicians, she entered medical school at the University of Alexandria in Egypt directly after high school. But her early experiences serving others helped define the kind of physician she wanted to become.

As a medical student, she became involved with Rotary International and the International Federation of Medical Students' Associations, participating in medical convoys serving underserved communities and programs supporting older adults. Those experiences gave her an understanding of medicine that extended far beyond treating disease.

"Medicine is more than a profession; it is a calling to serve others, advocate for vulnerable populations, and make a meaningful difference in people's lives," Dr. Khalil said. "That commitment has remained the driving force behind my career."

During Dr. Khalil's residency at Michigan State University's affiliated teaching hospital, McLaren Flint, mentors helped her further define that calling.

Dr. Helena Kush, a geriatrician and residency mentor, encouraged her to look beyond residency and pursue fellowship training. Another mentor, an intensivist who was also board-certified in hospice and palliative medicine, showed her what physicians can offer even when curative medicine has reached its limits.

She watched as he continued to give patients and their families comfort, dignity, guidance and hope. That lesson ultimately became central to Dr. Khalil's own career in hospice and palliative medicine.

"As a woman, a mother and someone who has faced hardships, I bring a unique perspective to patient care," she said. "I see my patients not simply as diagnoses or medical cases, but as individuals with families, fears, goals and stories of their own."

For Dr. Khalil, understanding the person behind the illness is fundamental to providing meaningful care — particularly when patients and families are confronting serious or life-threatening conditions.

Resilience forged through challenge

Dr. Khalil's journey has not been without significant obstacles.

As an international medical graduate, she moved from overseas to begin her career in the United States, adapting simultaneously to a new culture, a new healthcare system and the demands of residency. At one point, that meant moving alone to a new state with a young child, establishing herself in an unfamiliar community and balancing the intense responsibilities of training with motherhood — often without a strong support system.

"There were many moments when the path felt overwhelming," she said. "But those experiences taught me that I am far more resilient than I ever imagined."

She learned to persevere through uncertainty, remain focused under pressure and keep moving forward when circumstances were difficult. More importantly, those experiences changed the way she views leadership.

Dr. Khalil recognizes that everyone carries a story — and sometimes struggles that others cannot see. That understanding has made listening, empathy and support central to the way she leads.

"Leadership is about being present, listening, providing support and helping others find their way forward."

Today, she strives to create environments where people feel heard, valued and empowered, particularly during the moments when they may be questioning themselves.

Honoring women who paved the way

When Dr. Khalil reflects on being a woman in medicine, she thinks not only about her own journey but also about the generations of women whose determination made that journey possible.

She grew up as a double minority in her community and learned early that equal opportunity could require greater effort, perseverance, and determination. Those

experiences instilled a resilience and work ethic that have remained with her throughout her career.

At the same time, she sees her accomplishments as part of a much larger story.

“I am able to attend medical school, practice medicine and lead within my profession because generations of women worked tirelessly to create opportunities that did not exist for them,” she said. “I feel a responsibility to honor their sacrifices by giving my best every day.”

Two women in particular helped shape that perspective.

Dr. Kush saw potential in Dr. Khalil during a period when she struggled to see it herself. Her encouragement and unwavering support helped give her the confidence to continue growing as both a physician and a leader.

Her mother, a dentist, provided another powerful example. Dr. Khalil watched her balance the demands of a healthcare career with devotion to her family, always finding time to show up for the people who needed her.

Together, their examples taught her the importance of perseverance, sacrifice, family and the tremendous impact one woman can have simply by believing in another.

Dr. Khalil now works intentionally to offer that same support to women coming behind her by mentoring, encouraging and advocating for them, particularly during their moments of doubt. Her service on the FMA Women in Medicine Committee is an extension of that commitment.

“Sometimes leadership means offering guidance, and sometimes it simply means being present and reminding someone of their strengths when they cannot see them themselves,” she said.

A future where women simply belong

Dr. Khalil’s advice to young women beginning careers in medicine starts with something deceptively simple: *Know your priorities.*

Career, family, personal growth and service will inevitably compete for time and attention. Knowing what matters most, she believes, provides an anchor when medicine — and life — becomes difficult.

Challenges cannot always be avoided. What can be controlled is how we respond to them.

“Perseverance, resilience and consistency are often more important than talent alone,” she said.

When Dr. Khalil considers what she hopes medicine will look like for the next generation of women, her vision is both ambitious and remarkably straightforward.

She hopes for a profession in which women are recognized for their abilities, contributions and leadership without having to constantly prove that they belong. She hopes motherhood and caregiving are respected and supported through meaningful policies and workplace cultures. Ultimately, she hopes there may come a day when the distinction “women in medicine” is no longer necessary.

Until then, Dr. Khalil is doing her part to move medicine closer to that future — through the patients she comforts, the families she guides, the colleagues she supports, and her service alongside fellow female physicians through the FMA.

Her story is a reminder that some of the most enduring forms of leadership happen when we use the path we have traveled to make the journey a little easier for those coming behind us.