

## How did you get your start practicing medicine?

**AMIR RASHIDIAN:** When I was 9 years old, I decided I had to become a doctor. My dad and I were traveling through these remote villages in Iran, in the foothills of the Alborz mountain range. Imagine the most beautiful green scenery in the mountains. These villages had no plumbing, no power lines, no motorized vehicles. As my dad and I were just observing, a woman went into labor. She was in tremendous pain. Something was wrong. No one knew what to do. And a midwife finally walked over, she knelt down and listened and examined her for few minutes, stood up and said, “I’m sorry. There is nothing I can do. There is no heartbeat, the baby is not alive, and this lady is not going to make it.”

Everyone who was standing around, one by one, they just put their head down and started to leave. They were leaving her to say goodbye, basically, to her husband. Her husband was right there. He just collapsed, fell to his knees, started crying, “We were just about to start a family—how could this be?”

I was looking at the eyes of this young woman who was just told she won’t be alive in another couple of hours, and I started to have this panic attack, where your throat gets choked up and you feel pressure on your chest. I was having trouble catching my breath, and tears were just coming down. My dad saw me in that state, picked me up, held me, carried me out of there, and he calmed me down. And then two of us climbed down the mountain to get in our car to drive home, and on the drive home, I said, “Dad, I don’t want to feel like that ever again.” “Like what?” “Helpless, like I can’t do something to help.” And Dad asked me what I was going to do about it. I said, “I’m going to go be a doctor. I’ll be the surgeon that everyone needs. I’ll be the best surgeon in the whole world, carrying my bag with me everywhere I go, and I’m going to just save lives.”

Ten years passed. I was a student in George Washington University, 19 years old at this time, and I went home for Christmas break. Our home was now in Gaithersburg, Maryland. I walked in the door and my dad had this big, thick, white neck brace on, and he couldn’t lift his arms to give a hug. He was limp from the shoulders down. He was definitely under the influence of some serious painkillers. So we spent my Christmas break, those six weeks or so, going from doctor to doctor trying to figure out what is

wrong with my dad. Every doctor we go to said, “No, no this is beyond my scope. You need to go to this other doctor.”

Finally, we ended up in a neurosurgeon’s office and the neurosurgeon took a look at Dad’s MRIs and x-rays and said, “You’ve got these massive bone spurs growing into the spinal canal, pressing on the spinal cord, and it’s choking the life that flows from your brain to the rest of your body. Unless we find a way to decompress, this will not end well. You’re going to need surgery.”

Dad didn’t want to have surgery. He was scared of surgery. So we decided to get a second and a third opinion, and all three neurosurgeons that we met with said the same thing: “There are bone spurs, degeneration, spinal cord is being compressed and you won’t live unless we get the pressure off.”

Dad asked, “What you are going to do?” They said “Well, you know, normal neck surgery is done through the front, but not with you. We’re going to open up the whole neck in the back. We’re going to break and remove the bones in the back of your spine, take pressure off the spinal cord. We’ll put these rods on the sides, we’ll screw them into your spine. We’ll fuse your whole neck—you’ll never turn your head again. You may not regain function of your hands, but we’re hoping you’ll have less pain. And by the way, there’s a good chance you’ll die under the knife, because you’re old.”

Dad was 70 at the time. And it’s not really the number; there’s such a thing as a young 70 and an old 70. He was the old 70. So, it’s not about the number, but the fact that he’s already losing his life, but now we have to risk it to see if we can get some of that back, and if he can’t use his hands, well, Dad had a passion, he had a hobby. He loved writing. He always wrote jokes and letters and poems and stories. He liked to write letters to the President. The President of the US got a letter from dad—I don’t know if he ever read it—but got a letter from my dad about every month. But Dad couldn’t use his hands. He can’t dress himself, he can’t feed himself, he can’t write, he can’t work, and he basically had to sit in a chair.

We left that third neurosurgeon, got in a taxi to go home. I’m in the back of the taxi holding all the x-rays and MRIs and CTs—now they come on a disk—but, you know, 23

years ago, that was heavy stuff. I'm sitting there, and I looked over my dad and with his neck brace, and he was cringing, because every bump that taxi hit was sending a bolt of pain through his entire body. Looking in his eyes, I could tell he wished he was dead, and emotionally I got transported right back to that village where I saw the woman die in her husband's arms and no one could help. And I'm watching my own dad die in front of me.

The taxi driver saw me get all teary-eyed and choked up, and I'm having the same feelings of having trouble breathing, so he said, "I noticed you're in lot of pain,"—talking to my dad—"and I know you asked me to take you home, but there's this chiropractor right down the street—why don't you let me take you there?"

I was a 19-year-old know-it-all, so I said, "Absolutely not." Dad was afraid of the surgery, so he said, "Why not? Let's go! Let's check it out." So, we showed up to this chiropractor's office. Long story short: the place was under construction; there was framing but there were no walls. There was a crew putting up drywall, but there was no rooms, there was no floor—it was concrete—we walked in, I'm thinking, "we should grab that taxi before he leaves. The chiropractor came around—nice guy—introduced himself, brought a light box plugged it into the wall, started reading all the MRIs that I carried in, and after looking at the MRIs he told my dad, "You've got these bone spurs that are growing into the spinal canal, pressing on the spinal cord and it's choking the life that flows from your brain to the rest of your body. Unless we find a way to decompress, this will not end well."

And I started to gain a little bit of respect for him. He told my dad, "You're going to need to get adjusted. It's going to take you a long time to get better, but if you don't want to have surgery, this is your alternative and it may not be an easy road. What do you want to do?"

Dad said, "I'm going to give it a shot." He went there for six months. At the end of the six months my dad walked into that office—by now the construction's done, the office was beautiful—chairs and a reception counter and nice wood floor, and there was a receptionist right behind the counter and every chair had a patient in it, the office was packed—and my dad walked in the door, walked up to the counter, picked up the pen to sign his name on the sign in sheet. It was the first time he could write again. He was so

proud of himself, he held the pen over his head. He started to walk back and forth showing everybody that he could do that. Everybody in the room started to smile or laugh: “Who’s this old guy holding the pen over his head?” But the receptionist behind the counter cried, because every time my dad would walk in there she had to write his name for him, or she would help him and hold his hand, try to help him write, and he would drop the pen and he would get so frustrated. But that day, and every day after that, Dad was writing again. He was able to do everything he needed to do. In fact, the President started getting letters from my dad all over again, after a year hiatus.

Dad lived to be 88 years old. At 88 he was younger than when he was 70. He’d get up in the morning, exercise, go out the door, visit his friends—they were all in nursing homes but not my dad. He was driving himself, living the good life, traveling across the country and abroad, really enjoying himself. He lived long enough to stand right next to me as my best man when I got married, and he lived long enough to meet my first son when he was born.

I get really passionate when it comes to health and healing, especially a natural healing of the human body, because when you think about it, when my dad was sick and when he was suffering, when he was hurting, he wasn’t the only one who suffered. Everyone who cared about him suffered. Everyone who loved him got affected by it. My point is it’s not just about you. It’s about everyone who cares about you. And if you take the time to take care of your health to not suffer like he did, you’re actually protecting your family members and your loved ones from suffering as well. Health is the most valuable thing you have. It’s the most important thing you have. It’s worth the investment of time, energy, resources. We have to do it, not for us but for the people we care about.