



## **Episode 6 Why I Left Dermatology and Became a Physician Coach**

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HF: *'I worked so hard to build this thing, I thought I was creating a great environment and I'm miserable, I'm stressed, I was sick all the time. I was getting sinus infections. I don't get sick and I'm popping off at people. What is wrong?'*

Welcome to The Doctors' Crossing *Carpe Diem* podcast. If you're questioning your career in medicine, you've come to the right place. I'm Heather Fork, a former dermatologist and founder of The Doctors' Crossing. As a master certified coach, I've helped hundreds of physicians find greater happiness in their career, whether in medicine, a non-clinical job, or something else.

I started this podcast to help you discover the career path that's best for you and give you some resources and encouragement to make it happen. You don't need to get stuck at the white coat crossroads. So, pull up a chair my friend, and let's *carpe* that *diem*.

Hello, hello and welcome to The Doctors' Crossing *Carpe Diem* podcast. I'm excited today and I must admit a little bit nervous because I'm going to share with you the story of why I left medicine as a dermatologist and became a coach for physicians. Now, even though I've been sharing stories on my blog at The Doctor's Crossing for over 10 years, of my clients who transitioned through a wide variety of non-clinical careers and also found ways to really be happy in medicine, I've never told my story except for little bits and pieces.

I'm very honored today to have the pleasure of my friend, Dr Diana Hurwitz, who did residency with me and has been a dear, dear friend ever since, interview me, because she's seen the whole thing. The good, the bad and the ugly. It is my pleasure to introduce to you, Dr. Diana Hurwitz. Hey Di, how's it going?

DH: Hey Heather. It's so lovely to be here and I feel honored and privileged to be part of both your journey over these years and this podcast.

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HF: Thank you, thank you! So, I'm here. I'm in your hands. You just lead the way!

DH: Well, I'd like to preface all this by commending you for telling your story because I think storytelling can be such an informative process, both for you and for others that you choose to share it with. And I think it can have a very healing effect on people. I think it can give people permission to reevaluate and to think about their lives in a different way and to give them permission to make changes if changes are needed.

HF: That's very well said and that is my hope that if people say, well if a dermatologist can leave, and do something different, then let me think about my situation.

DH: Exactly, exactly. So, I think to start let's go to the beginning of your journey and that began in high school when you thought you wanted to be a vet, is that correct?

HF: Yes, I loved animals and it just seemed like a natural fit, I worked for one in high school and I was mostly just cleaning cages and doing the spay neuter packs. I really wasn't interacting much with the animals or the veterinarian, but something about being in that environment told me, no, this is not for me. This is actually not the relationship I want to have with animals. And there's a little foreshadowing right here.

Fast forward to college, since my plan to be a vet just evaporated, I didn't know what to do and then I thought, okay, I could be Jane Goodall. Africa! Animals! That's going to be really fun. Well then I did some research at The National Zoo on the tarsier but I actually didn't love being a researcher and the PhDs were stressed out trying to get grant money, so there went Jane Goodall.

Well, by the time I was in third year of college, I hadn't figured it out but I thought, let me try chemistry, biology, and I ended up being in a class with a woman who became a really good friend of mine. She said, why don't you go pre-med? She was pre-med and she became a child psychiatrist. And so, I made the decision to make the decision to go to medical school, but I never really made the decision to be a doctor.

I think part of it was I was a pretty shy kid and I was more comfortable around animals so it wasn't a logical thing for me to think about spending all this time interacting in a very close way with people. But that's how I got launched in the direction of medical school.

DH: I think that's interesting because I think people feel more comfortable plugging into a plan and I think med school can offer that kind of structure for a lot of people. Even if it's not a great fit if you describe yourself as being an introvert.



- HF: Yes, that's true and I was very introverted even though we don't really use those labels when we're younger necessarily.
- DH: Right, and you may not even know that about yourself.
- HF: True. So then I did get launched on that plan and I ended up in medical school and it sounds odd but even to the day I entered medical school I was still hoping that I could find something different, but I didn't.
- DH: So you had reservations even back then?
- HF: Yes, I just thought, oh please let me find something else cos I think intuitively I knew that being a doctor and doing medicine just wasn't the right fit for me somehow.
- DH: But you persevered anyway.
- HF: Yeah, and the interesting thing is that I liked medical school and when I was in my second year, I discovered dermatology. It was in histology, I just fell in love with it, and then I read a book about dermatologists and I said, oh this sounds like a really interesting career. I also had an Accutane deficiency so I had acne, starting at age 12, and it was bad acne and spent a lot of time in the dermatologist's office even though it never clicked with me, Oh I want to do *that* when I was seeing him. However, I loved learning derm and once I came upon that idea, it just seemed right and a great fit. And as you know, I went to University of Miami for residency and we had a great program. We did everything.
- I saw more leprosy in our program than I did when I went to Africa as a medical student and we had autonomy. We got to do so much and then we had great camaraderie with everyone, we had just great residents.
- DH: I also think it was very collaborative. I think that there was a wonderful environment where people really were incentivized to help one another and to be part of a team.
- HF: Yes, it was, if it could have stayed like that, I think the chance is that it may have stuck but when I look back on it, it was really I think a highlight of my life.
- DH: Okay, so looking at your time-line Heather, residency is very positive and team-building and actualized. How do you make the leap from that to practice?
- HF: It wasn't anything I planned on. I was ready to go back to Austin and find a dermatologist who would hire me into their practice. However, even though I wrote letters to everyone and called

them, nobody was hiring. Well luckily, I found a dermatologist by making these phone calls who had decided the night before to sell his practice and I was like, yes, I don't have to work at Burger King!

That was really lucky and then I got a lot of mentoring from Dr Rube Pardo, who you ended up working for after we graduated and he would meet with me for breakfast in the doctors' dining room and answer my questions. That's how I got started. I had the good fortune of hiring a very young office manager who helped me build this practice.

She was amazing and often it was just me and her in the office at the beginning and then I hired a really great medical assistant. We were going along pretty well for a while and then – da-da! – you can see on the timeline there was a big dip.

DH: Okay. Let me just ask you a question before we go to the dip. How did you enjoy running a business of medicine versus practicing as a dermatologist? Could you separate that out for me?

HF: That's a good question. I would say, I had never had a business before. I had a paper route when I was a kid and I sold greeting cards door-to-door. So this was a big change and I think I liked learning it and I also was, the first day, it was funny, I remember seeing patients after I had spent all this time learning how to run the practice and get it going, that first day when I sat down in a room and saw patients, I thought, oh this is like riding a bicycle.

It was what we were trained to do. But what happened over time is that the seeing patients every 15 minutes and running, running all day long and then also managing the practice at the same time was, there was stress there, it wasn't like some people doing surgeries or really dangerous cases – that kind of stress or being in the emergency room - but it was a chronic stress of the responsibility of it all.

I think there was also this, I was getting out of alignment because, as I said, I'm a very introverted person and having all these interactions, patient after patient, 30 - 40 times a day was just not how I'm wired. And we can do that for a while, but I think it was starting to take its toll.

DH: Would you use the term 'burnout' to describe how you were feeling?

HF: I was, even though back then people weren't using the term burnout. We didn't talk about it in residency – I didn't really know the term – but I was starting to get stressed and there's a sort of complicated background to all of this. So, this was about four and a half years into practice, and you see that big dip. Like if you looked at a stock chart it's when the market crashes.

Leading up to this time, there were some things with the staff and also myself and our personal lives that were coming in and my office manager, she was young, she had a young son, but her husband had a chronic illness and it was starting to get worse and she started having to take a lot of time off and wasn't in the office.

We were trying to run things without her. Then another one of my staff went on maternity leave and I thought my office manager might be coming back so we didn't hire anybody, a temporary person or anything, and so she taught me how to do the billing. At the end of a long day, I was doing the billing at night, and then I had met somebody in my personal life and it started out really great, you know. I thought this might be 'the one'. I was in my late thirties and had never been married and was really excited about it.

However, it started to have some really significant issues and I wasn't handling it well so I would go home from work and then there was this major stress to my personal life, then my house flooded from top to bottom from a pipe that burst while I was at work. I came home and there were 8 inches of water in my house. Then I had a contractor from H.E. double toothpicks so I'd come home at the end of the day from work and see he had tiled in the dishwasher and used the wrong grout and I know these aren't big things in life ...

DH: It's like a tipping point I think you can tolerate a lot of things and then you get to a point where it's all too much.

HF: It was adding up, it wasn't like my office manager's husband. He was dying and that was really an awful, awful time and she lost her husband and when we all found that out, it tore the office apart. I think it really shook – it makes everybody re-examine their life and so I didn't really add in this piece – so this is another part.

Where when I started feeling stressed and unhappy and unfulfilled, I thought, well, what's going to be the solution? And I thought, ah, we need to have our own building. We need to have this beautiful office because we were getting cramped everywhere, the walls were thin and so I actually bought this building in Austin and was in the process of meeting with architects to renovate it for a medical space. It was going to be very expensive. It was a really bad decision. It was one of those decisions when your marriage is on the rocks and you decide to have a baby or you build a house. It's like you're not identifying the problem and the solution is not the solution.

DH: Exactly. It might be the anti-solution.



HF: Well, it was and because I had taken on this big mortgage, I was seeing more patients. My office manager was out. The gal was out on maternity leave. It was just stressful and there's always a sign, for example, when you start getting away from who you are, and in the Enneagram, we talk about going down the levels, so I was going down the levels. And I popped off one day at a drug rep. I kicked him out of the office.

I was stressed from seeing patients and I felt like he was interrupting me, taking up my time and I just said, no more, you can't come in the office anymore! And that was a sign that I was starting to become someone I was not.

This is a long story and it's getting longer but let me try to get to what happened. My office manager's husband died, and then I thought after some time she would come back. Things would start to get back to normal. And she came back. Then the gal who was on maternity leave, came back and, oh it's going to be fine.

Well, one day I was seeing patients and I came out of the room and there were two envelopes on my desk. Two white envelopes. Like, huh, I opened one up and it was a resignation from my receptionist, the one that had the baby. I was like, okay. Alright, it's a transition.

And I opened up the other one and it was a resignation from my medical assistant and I just like, it broke my heart, because she had been with me since early on. She was like a niece, a daughter, we were very tight, and I had a tight relationship with my staff. I felt like we were a great group and we supported each other but really things had started to fall apart.

DH: Yeah, that can feel very isolating even if it has nothing to do with you.

HF: It was, it was, and I found out more later but at that time, I didn't know why she was quitting really. I didn't know and I just thought, what am I doing? I worked so hard to build the thing. I thought I was creating a great environment and I'm miserable. I'm stressed, I was sick all the time, I was getting sinus infections - I don't get sick - and I'm popping off at people! What is wrong?

So, I called up my realtor Jeff Coddington and I said, Jeff! Sell the building! I don't even want to practice! I was like, this is not working. And he says, Dr Fork, are you okay? I said, No! I'm not okay! Do I sound okay? And he said, Okay, okay. Well, God loves the man, he turned around and sold that building right before the tech bubble burst.

DH: Oh, that's terrific.



HF: I know. He saved me and it gave me time. I just thought, well, things are not working well. I need to do something different and I made this commitment. I said, I'm going to try everything I can do to fix up my practice because I really had considered selling it. I was just thinking this is not for me. But I said, no, that's not the right decision. Don't leave from weakness, leave from a place of strength if you are going to leave. So, I said, do everything you can to make things better. If you give it the college try and you're still unhappy, well you can think about something else.

DH: So, you were giving yourself permission based on a plan.

HF: Yeah, I did. I talk to my clients a lot about that, the permission slip, and mine was just I want to be happy. That was my commitment to myself. I want to be happy and so I spent the next four and a half years changing things. Instead of buying a building we moved and I renovated a rental space much more affordably and I hired several aestheticians. We learned a lot about skin rejuvenation. We had an acne treatment program. I started doing even more sclerotherapy which I love and got off some insurance plans that were really challenging and it got a lot better.

DH: Were you happier?

HF: I think I was a lot more balanced and I did feel better. However, I was noticing that my interests were going in other directions too. That's when I started learning the Enneagram and going to workshops where you learn these personal development tools and I started using them on my staff. I'd say, do you want to do this program to help you make some changes? And so my aesthetician would do it and my friend would do them and it was like coaching but I didn't call it coaching, I didn't know what coaching was.

So, I was having these interests and I often mention that to my clients and say, pay attention to what you're doing that no one is paying you for. That was something I just naturally gravitated towards. And one day, my aesthetician, my lead aesthetician, asked me, she said, Dr Fork, how are things now? Are you happier? Do you think you're going to stay? She was really hoping that we would continue as we were. It broke my heart. Because I love my girls and we were like a family and I didn't want to disappoint them.

But I knew in my heart that it still wasn't the right fit because as lovely as my patients were, and I had the best patients in Austin. I did and I still hear about them from my aestheticians, but I just knew that I should be looking forward to my day. Looking forward to these visits because that's what they deserve. They deserve someone who is engaged in dermatology, wanting to

keep learning and grow and it wasn't fair to them that I wasn't as engaged as I should be and wanting to do less rather than more.

So my energy was really contracting and I think that's a sign I like to look for. Is your energy expanding into what you're doing? Or is it contracting? And mine was starting to contract.

DH: You wanted to put your time, your resources, your energy into something else.

HF: I think that's what I was feeling even though hopefully I don't think my patients knew. I loved seeing them, so I always tried to be present. I knew it wasn't sustainable and that's when I decided to sell the practice, which I did, around the 9-year mark, to someone who expanded it into 8 clinics though. I can see the difference there!

And I didn't know what I was going to do next. I know that can be unnerving for some people, however, I felt that I needed to do that because I had to figure out where I went wrong because I was afraid that if I just jumped into something else that I was going to make a wrong decision.

DH: Or maybe a decision that wouldn't maximize your happiness.

HF: I had to figure some things out so that's when I sold the practice. I sold my house with everything in it pretty much everything except my bicycle and a bed and I went out to the Hill Country and rented this small 800 square foot cabin near right next door to Willie Nelson! I called it my Walden Pond time without the pond!

DH: But that's such a brave leap. When you made that transition, was it scary? Did you feel a sense of relief? I want to hear more about how you felt when you finally sold your practice and didn't have a well formulated plan in terms of what your next step would be.

HF: It may sound odd however I don't think I was scared or nervous. Probably more naïve. I had saved up money and I really wasn't worried. I just figured I would figure it out and I think maybe partly because my parents have always let me make my own decisions. They never told me what to do or anything. I was used to just figuring things out and I may have just been not really thinking too much about what if things went wrong? What if I didn't figure it out? My mind doesn't tend to go there that much. Maybe there's some neuronal connection that's missing there! Gave me a little freedom for a bit of time, some synapse missing. I don't do a lot of 'what if' to the negative.

DH: I think that's a wonderful thing.



HF: Sometimes I could use a little bit more of that, I think! Okay, so what happened next? How did I find my next direction?

DH: So, you're at Willie Nelson's place, or adjacent to it, and you don't have an agenda. How do you use this time to figure out your next step?

HF: It sounds kind of counterintuitive, but I didn't try hard to figure out the answer. I bought, *What Color is your Parachute* and I only read the preface of it. What I did instead was I just followed my energy, where my energy wanted to flow. I know that sounds touchy-feely, but it helps us reconnect with who we really are. Because, as you know, we often become lost to that person. I did a lot of volunteering with animals and in soup kitchens. Things that I just wanted to do.

I road my bike in the Hill Country. I learned meditation. I read a lot of spirituality and self-help books. Before I wouldn't even admit that I would read a self-help book! But I needed some guidance and interestingly enough, when I was ready to go find my next career, I said, okay I'm ready now and then in two weeks I knew.

I was doing this test, it's called the Passion Test, where you look at, when I'm living my ideal life, I'm having, being and doing these things and I remember it like it was yesterday. I was on my back porch, the wind was kind of blowing, and I was doing this test and writing down these different ways I wanted my life to look. And I never finished it. I just said, oh my gosh, this is it. And I threw the test up in the air and I said, I want to help people find their ideal life.

I was so excited and obviously having tried to do that for myself and I think we often want to help other people with our own challenges. That's when I googled coaching schools, because I'd actually heard someone talking about being a coach and it interested me. Then fast-forward the first day I was in coach training I felt like I had come home and I said, this is for me, I know it, I feel it and there was never a question.

DH: That's amazing. So, it just felt right. It felt like you were in the flow and you went with that.

HF: That's it. And just to catch up quickly, what I did was, in training we had to have paying clients. They only paid \$10 or \$20 but we had to have some paying practice clients for certification. Two of my clients were physicians and I didn't know any other physicians had issues or challenges, had burnout. I loved working with them. And that's when I decided to start The Doctors' Crossing and coaching physicians was going to be my niche. That was over 10 years ago and it was hard to get a coaching business going, it's very difficult. In the first two years it was pretty dicey and sometimes I would call up the Board and I'd say, now what do I have to do to (get back) to do my certification? I always knew that if I went back it would be for the money and

that was just wrong. I just said, finally one day I said, no you're not calling up anymore, you're going to make this work. And when I made that commitment my coaching practice took off. It was weird. Probably coincidental but that was at about the 2-year mark.

DH: You never know.

HF: You never know. You never know. But when I think about it now I know what it's like to really be aligned with what you're doing versus being able to do it and do it well but having it be not quite the right fit, is that everything else works so much better. Your personal relationships, how you show up, the energy that you bring, it's expansive. I can never do enough. All my ideas that I want to do for this business and helping physicians, I can never do enough. So, it's not contracting the way it was in practice. It's expanding.

DH: And is that your end goal for all of your clients?

HF: To find their alignment? Yes, absolutely and that's different for everybody and it can also be seasonal alignment. You may be in a phase where you're not trying to find the passion, the be all, end all, you're trying to support your family, have a balanced life and feel good about what you're doing. So, alignment can look different and it's not the same for you. It's not the same for me. But when we find it, it works and it's sustainable.

DH: I think that's a beautiful way of describing it because I think if you are just plugging in a few things Needs, perceived wants, you don't necessarily get a holistic view.

HF: It's true and so often we tell ourselves, well, just suck it up. You took up a spot, you're going to disappoint people, this is what you trained for, you don't know how to do anything else and you need to do this. Well, that's harmful, that causes harm for you, it causes harm for your family, the people you are in a relationship with and you ultimately don't contribute as much when you're trying to force yourself to be and do something that you're not. And in a way it's disrespectful of yourself and your nature.

DH: I agree, and I think we all have gifts to share and in many ways it's our duty to honor that and to express that.

HF: I would say that's one of the reasons why I love what I do so much is I work with amazing people, amazing physicians. Every one of them have unique gifts and that is one of the roles I will never, ever tire of, which is helping them see what's unique about them and find ways to express these talents, these gifts, these interests in their heart.



Because most physicians go into medicine because they truly want to help and they're willing to sacrifice so much to help people. They just want to be able to make a difference, have an impact and enjoy their life. Just be a person where they can come home and not feel stressed and exhausted and drained and go back to work the next day and feel like they're not getting to be the kind of doctor that they want to be.

That arc of helping someone find the way to be in the world that works for them, that arc of transformation, I'll never, ever tire of that. That brings me incredible joy.

DH: And your arc has brought you incredible joy, so I think there's a lot of synergy there too.

HF: It's working. So at the end of the day, if you feel like you're judging yourself, just ask that question of, is this working for me or not? And it's a leveler. You only really have to answer that one question.

DH: Right, but it all begins with a story.

HF: Yes, so I want to thank you so much Di for being a great Sherpa here following me along the ups and the downs. I want to let people know that you can download a timeline exercise where you can see the timeline I drew of my story and there are some templates that you can use to chart your own story of how you became a doctor and how things are going up to the present time.

It's really helpful to see it visually out in front of you because it helps you see some patterns and think about where you want to go. You can download that at [www.doctorscrossing.com/timeline](http://www.doctorscrossing.com/timeline) and I'd love to see yours, please send them to me.

So, Di I want to thank you again. I know you're at a big major pivot point in your own life and career and so I look forward to having you on the podcast down the road.

DH: I would love to do that and share my story as well as it evolves.

HF: Definitely, I love it. Alright, well thanks again so much and don't forget guys to *carpe* that *diem*.

*Podcast details*

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