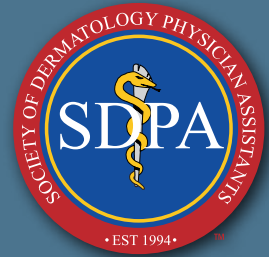


# JDPA

Journal of Dermatology for Physician Assistants



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# FROM THE PATIENT'S PERSPECTIVE

## *My Life My Way, With or Without Hair*

By Courtney Sayre

Losing my hair helped me find myself - the most open minded, confident, and happy version of myself. I found the "bald girl with a positive outlook on life" version of myself. This is the most profound self-revelation I have experienced thus far. For that reason I am grateful beyond words for the disease, which made me bald. I am thankful for my alopecia totalis.

When the onset first began, however, my feelings were vastly different. My dermatologist informed me that there were treatment options. However, since alopecia is an autoimmune disorder, none of them were guaranteed to make my hair come back so I needn't get my hopes up. Ever willing to try, I began using two different topical medications, which proved to be unsuccessful. In desperation, we tried cortisone steroid shots. These were painful and also unsuccessful, so we discontinued use.

My alopecia was relatively aggressive, causing me to lose nearly all of my hair within a matter of months. I tried my best to remain positive, but the failed medications and decreasing amount of hair on my teenage-girl head were difficult to bear emotionally. Surely there were more treatment options, but something my dermatologist said when he first diagnosed me with alopecia stuck with me. He told me that my best bet was to embrace being bald. At the time, the suggestion was equally terrifying and ridiculous, but as I write this paper today I am contented to say that I have done just that.

Being a bald girl has influenced my life in the most humbling of ways. I am frequently asked if I have cancer, as my lack of hair makes me resemble someone who is receiving chemotherapy. After nearly two years of withstanding these misguided strangers' questions I have grown to anticipate and accept them. They simply act as



The National Alopecia Areata Foundation (NAAF) supports research to find a cure or acceptable treatment for alopecia areata, supports those with the disease, and educates the public about alopecia areata.

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*"I am not terminally ill.  
I am healthy, and I am happy.  
That alone is reason for a  
peace of mind."*

a reminder that I do not, in fact, have cancer. I am not terminally ill. I am healthy, and I am happy. That alone is reason for a peace of mind.

This disease has taught me to acknowledge the insignificance of things like hair or other superficial aspects of appearance, which our society has unfortunately placed so much emphasis on. It has challenged me to instead place my focus on the "bigger" things in life. I may not have hair, but I am healthy. I have the ability



to live my life and accomplish whatever I set my mind to do. I am who I am not because of my appearance, but because of the way I treat others and the way I choose to live my life. I choose to love myself; I choose happiness. But what choice is it, really? The way I look at it, I can either be miserable about the fact that I don't have hair or choose to love both my

life and myself unconditionally. For me, the choice is pretty easy.

I promised my dermatologist and myself that I would sustain a positive mindset no matter what happened because there are people out there who do have cancer or some other terrible illness. There are people struggling to stay alive. When I think about this, I am again made aware that in the grand scheme of things my life is good. I am thankful for the valuable lessons being bald have taught me, and the new perspectives I have gained. My growth is bigger than just my own personal

self-acceptance. It has changed the way I think about others, and has made me more accepting and open-minded when considering the world at large. More than anything, however, it has provided me motivation to push myself to keep discovering who I truly am, and to live my life as the most exemplary, moral, and respectful person I possibly can be. I have my whole life ahead of me, and I am excited to see where it takes me, with or without hair. 📌



*Courtney Sayre lives in upstate NY with her parents, two sisters, and her cat Katie. She is a senior in High School where she actively participates in Character Education and SADD (Students Against Destructive Decisions). Courtney's earlier years were spent riding and showing horses, participating in 4-H events, and playing*

*lacrosse. She remains active in 4-H where she is a member of the Senior Advisory Board for her local county. Upon graduation, she intends to pursue a degree in Wellness Management in the Fall of 2016, where she will explore the numerous career paths within the medical field. Courtney is thankful for the accelerated insight on life values her alopecia has provided her and plans to make the most of them in her future, and the futures of those around her.*

## Take Home Points for Derm PAs:

By Steven K. Shama, MD, MPH, FAAD

1. There is a time and a place for clinicians such as Courtney's dermatologist, when they are pretty sure that the worst is yet to come with alopecia areata, to say to a patient to "embrace being bald." Recall that Courtney's first response to her dermatologist's comment was "...terrifying and ridiculous..." However, at some point in a patient's diagnosis of a chronic disease with little hope for cure, the clinician must be honest with the patient and in as compassionate a way suggest that the patient find the best, most uplifting message in their diagnosis. In fact, as Courtney writes, it was the best words her dermatologist could have told her. The message that Courtney received did not take away her hope, but set a realistic path

that would benefit both Courtney's care and her life.

2. An unexpected benefit from the honesty of her dermatologist was that Courtney not only accepted her skin condition but set her on a path to deeply explore her own life and its meaning, and to see people with greater acceptance and open mindedness. None of us can ever know the exact "message" a diagnosis of a chronic disease brings to us, but why can't we, as clinicians, respectfully and in a compassionate way suggest to our patients that their diagnosis may bring something positive into their lives and explore with them what this message might be. 📌



# Dermatology Physician Assistants



**Physician Assistants (PAs) in dermatology play a number of varied and vital roles.**

PAs are medical providers licensed to practice medicine with physician supervision. From patient care and education, to skin surgery, treatment of chronic skin conditions, and cosmetic procedures, PAs are dynamic members of the healthcare team. PAs practice in every medical and surgical specialty and have been collaborating with dermatologists for 30 years, providing a wide variety of services. These include diagnosing, prescribing medications, ordering and interpreting lab tests, wound suturing, and medical or surgical treatment of a wide variety of clinical diseases. As with all PAs, dermatology PAs are legally and ethically bound to practice only under physician supervision.

**PAs are trained in intensive, accredited education programs.**

Because of the close working relationship that PAs have with physicians, PAs are educated in the medical model designed to mirror and complement physician training. PAs take a national certification examination and to maintain their certification, they must complete 100 hours of continuing medical education every two years and take a recertification exam every six years. Graduation from an accredited PA program and passage of the national certifying exam are required for state licensure.

How a PA practices dermatology varies with training, experience, and state law. In addition, the scope of the PA's responsibilities corresponds to the supervising physician's scope of practice. In general, a PA will see many of the same types of patients as the physician. Referral to the physician, or close consultation between the PA and physician, is based on the dynamic relationship between the physician and PA.

**The Society of Dermatology Physician Assistants (SDPA)** is a non-profit professional organization, composed of members who provide dermatologic care or have an interest in the medical specialty of dermatology. Fellow members provide medical services under the supervision of a board certified dermatologist.

More information can be found at [www.dermpa.org](http://www.dermpa.org) and [www.aapa.org](http://www.aapa.org).

