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When I consider the factors that resulted in my decision to become a doctor, two of them seem crucial. The first, and most profound one, finds its roots in the early years of my childhood, when I was growing up with an older sibling suffering from a condition characterized by impaired muscle coordination, determined to have arisen as a result of brain damage at birth or shortly after. I frequently asked myself how come my sister had a distinct way of walking and couldn’t use her left hand as other children did. I also remember recurrent visits to different medical professionals, and despite some successful outcomes of surgical procedures, there was never any realistic hope that her disorder could be cured.

At some point, my parents were made aware of the fact that aside from physical and family therapy not much could be done and my sister’s cerebral palsy was something we all would just have to live with. A trusted doctor once suggested that the only way to significantly improve my sister’s condition would involve an operation on the brain, but he also made it clear that because of the organ’s complexity and our poor understanding of its function, no surgeon would take the risk. The possibility of treatment, whether through orthopedic surgeries, various rehabilitation programs or fairly supportive social environment was what enabled my sister to live a nearly normal life. In spite of numerous obstacles, she was able to earn a college degree and is currently enrolled in law school with a goal in mind. The schooling process, just like tying her shoes with one hand, is something that may take her more time and effort, but she is nonetheless on her way towards greater independence and fulfillment.

There is no doubt in my mind that without access to adequate medical care and the relatively supportive social environment, my sister wouldn’t be where she is today. Looking at my family in retrospect, I am very grateful that there were individuals who were capable and willing to improve my sister’s level of functioning. While there may not be cure for cerebral palsy, there are definitely some highly effective ways to manage it. I only wish that every affected individual had access to proper
health care and that every affected family could receive adequate social support. Right assistance is crucial in order to lessen the degree of isolation stemming from a relative’s disability. My involvement in the many challenges faced by a family bringing up a child of special needs ultimately resulted in my determination to not only acquire the necessary skills to help affected patients, but, in addition, to contribute through medical research to a greater understanding of the disorders of the nervous system.

My interest in the medical profession has been reinforced recently when as a consequence of learning about my friend’s diagnosis of schizophrenia, I felt compelled to educate myself about the nature of the disorder. Searching for knowledge seemed like a rational measure towards finding a way to cope with fear and concern about my affected friend and people involved in his care. Schizophrenia thus became the topic of my undergraduate honors thesis. Having reviewed considerable amounts of literature, I can definitely conclude to have learned one thing: that over twenty years after my sister was diagnosed with cerebral palsy, the brain still remains something of an enigma. The only sure conclusion I can draw is that there are many more questions than answers. Moreover, I strengthened my belief in the utmost importance of social support, which must come in parallel with proper medical care. A strong, supportive family environment is crucial, but families must be given the right tools to cope, because if those tools are missing, the schizophrenic individual may end up completely rejected, isolated, and unable to care for oneself.

Writing my honors thesis is just one of the many steps I will take in order to attain an improved awareness of the brain and the ways in which it malfunctions. Obviously, I cannot stop my exploration with a concluding chapter of my thesis – I must continue on this path full of uncertainties and tough questions with no apparent answers because this is how my life experiences and the people I have known shaped me. It is clear that recent years have produced many advanced technological tools that greatly enhanced and will continue to enhance our understanding of the nervous system. The future seems incredibly bright for neurological research. It is my goal to become part of the community that searches for and ultimately finds some important answers pertaining to our knowledge of the brain.

Personal Statement – Anna Gawkowska
While I realize a low likelihood that my training as physician will directly benefit either of the two individuals I described above, I do have faith that it could, in a more general sense, have an impact on the welfare of other human beings. In my opinion, entering the medical profession is the right step on my way to become a more knowledgeable individual equipped with necessary tools to look for some badly needed answers and to effectively care for patients.