

Life as a first-year doctor

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At my seventh-form dinner, the final event before we were sent forth to tertiary study and beyond, we had a female junior doctor as our guest speaker. She was a former head girl of the school; had gone on to study medicine, and was invited along to inspire us.

I have now forgotten most of her speech and also her name, but I can vividly recall an anecdote she told us from her first week at work. She was called to see a patient on the ward on an evening duty. To her horror, she discovered the man was frighteningly unwell. Her first instinct was to urge the nearest nurse to “call the doctor!” Her heart sank as she realised *she* was the doctor. Oh how we laughed.

The next six years passed merrily on until that magical day when I went to bed a medical student and woke up a doctor. I had applied for a job at Whangarei Hospital for many reasons. First, it was a smaller hospital which meant greater responsibility. I’d heard that jumping in at the deep end was the best way to go: I was hoping to swim rather than sink. Whangarei was also close to Auckland where I had grown up and had been away from for six years while studying at Otago. Lastly, and most importantly, Whangarei was only an hour’s drive from my parents’ house – definitely close enough for me to retreat, cry, and drink cups of tea when the job got all too much.

My first job at Whangarei was General Surgery. In at the deep end was right. I miserably remembered the former head girl’s speech many times during that first week. The first occasion was when an elderly male tourist had massive PR bleed after massive PR bleed and dropped his haemoglobin to 46 in a matter of hours. I was fluffing about the bed with intravenous fluids when the charge nurse helpfully suggested it might be time for me to call my registrar. The team took his colon out later that night. My first evening on call in my first week involved my first cardiac arrest. In keeping with the theme I was first at the scene. Thank God for the recently completed Advanced Cardiac Life Support training, and the cavalry that arrived within minutes.

I would not have survived that first quarter without the endless help of my other first-year colleagues. Our predecessors had recommended we help each other out

when busy. This certainly happened but we also developed an invaluable support network for minor procedures. If we couldn’t succeed with a luer, arterial blood gas, or even a blood test, we’d ring around for a hand. This was particularly useful for me because when I started I couldn’t get a luer in a drainpipe. Within a matter of weeks, however, there were the odd occasions when I could get a luer in a patient where one of my colleagues had failed. Now that was job satisfaction.

Those first few weeks were terrible. I felt useless at best and a hindrance at worst. Slowly things got better: I found I could answer nurses’ questions (rather than asking their advice), have a calculated guess at what was wrong with a patient in the Emergency Department, AND get most of my luers. After surviving Surgery I moved to my first Medical run. Under a brilliant consultant and registrar I learned a lot, completed many different procedures, and began to feel like I was good at my job.

The rest of the year passed in a blur of winter medicine and orthopaedics. Soon we were welcoming the next group of first-year house surgeons to Whangarei. The best advice I was given that I can pass on to budding first-years is to ask questions. Ask – even if you are afraid it is a stupid question (it probably is). For example, in my first week I rang my surgical registrar to tell him one of our patients was hypokalaemic – it was 3.3 I think. Looking back now, I cringe at that episode, but at the time, words of kind reassurance from my registrar helped me sleep that night. (Incidentally, the next day I discovered Slow K and Chlorvescent and I was away laughing.)

Lastly, when you are thinking in those first weeks that you are the worst doctor ever, worrying you can’t do the job, and feeling like you’re as much use as a chocolate teapot: keep telling yourself it will get better. Medical school can only teach you so much and there is a point where you must learn on the job. All your registrars and nursing colleagues will understand this. Plus they’ve been through those first awful weeks with your predecessors countless times. And remember, all your first-year friends across the country will be feeling the same way.

Now I am a big bad second-year doctor.

I did it.

I survived. ■