

Babies and Medical School

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Tara King is a final year medical student studying through the University of Otago at the Christchurch campus. She has a Bachelor of Science in Biology and a Post Graduate Diploma in Science (Microbiology). She was born and raised on the Chatham Islands but has spent the majority of her adult life living in Christchurch. Tara lives with her four children, all girls and in her spare time enjoys painting.

Introduction

First Year Health Science commenced with a six-year-old, four-year-old and a barely three-month-old baby in tow, all girls. My family was upheaved from Christchurch where we had plenty of school friends, family and a great support network and setup in Dunedin for three years where we knew almost no one. Having completed a Postgraduate Diploma in Microbiology and working as a Senior Laboratory Technician for three years, I was ready for a challenge and I was not disappointed. Below are some of my experiences and hopefully helpful tips for those thinking about starting a family before or during medical school.

My experience of Medical school

First Year Health Science (FYHS)

FYHS was the most stressful year of my whole medical degree. When I started the first semester I was breastfeeding my beautiful baby. Within three weeks my milk dried up and I had lost eight kilograms. I had never done physics in my life and it seemed I lived, breathed and dreamed physics. My days were treated as a work day. Being at university from 8am- 4pm, following which I would go home, cook tea, hang out with my family and at 7pm on the dot I would go to my office and study until at least 10pm. During that time my husband would get the children to bed. Friday nights were my down time. I was almost unapproachable until I had sat down, had a couple glasses of wine and unwound from the week.

The second semester was less demanding; I did not take a fourth paper. The ultimate parenting challenge came in that final exam week. While walking my daughter into the day care centre before the Biochemistry exam, she began vomiting. Day care rules meant she could not stay and that she had to be vomit free for 48 hours before being allowed to return. As a result, my husband had to leave work to look after her while I sat my exam, even though he had no annual or sick leave left. If that was not bad enough, when I walked out of the Biochemistry exam, I needed to find a babysitter to be able to study and sit the Epidemiology exam in two days' time. With a sick child and a husband who had to go to work logistically, I did not know how I would sit the exam. Thankfully, my parents-in-law came to the rescue and later that evening they drove to Dunedin to babysit. The following day I was locked in my office preparing for the final exam of FYHS while they attended to the demands of a sick baby.

Despite the challenges of being physics naïve and having a sick child the grades I got that year were by far the best I had ever gotten in my life. I was so determined to do well, and together my husband and I found a routine that worked to get through it. It set me up well for the years to follow.

Early Learning in Medicine (ELM- years 2 & 3)

The day medical school started I was very excited. The hustle and bustle of all the baby medical students arriving for their first day, some even had their parents drop them off. I did not know many of the students, having not been in a hall the previous year, so it was interesting seeing my colleagues for the next five years. ELM was a breeze after FYHS. I could relax and simply absorb what we were being taught. I did not find it too challenging if I went to class, did my tutorial prep and kept up with assignments.

Throughout second year I was plagued by migraines. I put them down to having started on the Depo injection, while everyone else thought it was stress. However, second year was stress-free compared with FYHS. It was overwhelming studying a full year's worth of work for exams. I hate to admit but there were tears and tantrums. There were days when I was relying on the study time where I could not do anything because of a migraine and would instead hang out with my family. I got through it and passed. By this stage I had decided that a potential distinction was not a realistic goal for me and I just had to get through the next five years the best I could.

At the beginning of third year, my husband and I decided to conceive baby number four. We looked at the dates, did some calculations and decided we had a two-month window. If we conceived the first month, the baby would be due around exam time. If we conceived the second month, baby would be due when we were about to move back to Christchurch for Advanced Learning in Medicine (ALM). No time was ideal, as it turned out the baby was due around exam time.

I found being pregnant in Medical school variable. In ELM you are either in a tutorial, a lecture or at a laboratory session. In short, you are sitting down all day and the University staff were very supportive. In addition, that year I had decided to become the MECA (Medical student conference) Coordinator and the Coordinator for the OUMSA Charity Art Auction, thus I was very busy. Studying for exams was not always easy, I was often exhausted or unable to concentrate. The three evenings a week when my husband worked and I took care of the kids alone were at times a struggle. My eight-year-old would have to take over preparing dinner because the smell made me nauseous. It was difficult dealing with the children on my own after studying all day. I slept when I felt like I had to, I would rest with the kids and try not to be too hard on myself. The day of my final OSCE was also the day I gave birth, thus I sat it two days later instead with a sleeping baby downstairs being cooed at by adoring medical students.

Advanced Learning in Medicine (ALM- years 4, 5 & 6)

The summer holiday between third and fourth year was busy with a new baby, the big move back to Christchurch and trying to find a house. In this period, I managed to breast feed exclusively for four months and then supplement with formula for an additional month. Once in the hospital, I loved the clinical environment, but the hours were long and the days of work felt endless. Some weeks I felt like the worst mother in the world because I had barely seen the kids. Other weeks I would get home early each day and got to do all the "mummy things".

Preparing for fifth year exams required a lot of self-motivation and

discipline. I started an OSCE practice group in March and had weekly Sunday sessions with three of my classmates. I was well-prepared, and if any of my children got sick (and they did get sick, plenty), I knew I had been studying steadily since the start of the year. I had never been able to concentrate in the library, so before the finals, I hijacked a friend's house to study all day. I felt inadequate compared to the other students as they had as many hours in the day to study as they required. However, I developed a routine of studying at the hospital in between placement and then in the evenings studying at home until I could focus no longer once the children went to bed. I successfully passed the final exams and got to relax at home with the kids until Trainee Intern (TI) year started.

My TI year has gone well. I am very aware of my pending employment where I will not get away with starting 30 minutes late every now and then to drop the kids at school nor get away early so I can be home when they get home from school. I have gone through a marriage break-up this year and juggling children, housework and schoolwork can be challenging. As a result, the house is a mess and my assignments get done the day before they are due. Currently I have a temperamental 'tweenager', kids struggling at school, one child with chronically bad eczema with recurrent skin infections (now MRSA), all the while trying to ease them through the break-up of their family as they know it. It has been a learning curve. I have not always done the right thing but I always try to learn for next time and ensure my children know I love them and am there for them always.

Childcare

The biggy! It really depends on your family situation. Are you a solo parent or in a relationship? What is your support network like? Medical school can be 40-60 hours a week, sometimes more, with study time required on top of it, so you need something flexible. ELM was not too bad as there are no evenings or weekend shifts.

I have used a combination of childcare options:

- Day-care and Before and After School Care, it helps if you qualify for a childcare subsidy.
- Stay at home parent, the nicest choice by far but often not an option. Ladies remember men can be stay-at-home-parents too (you just need to be able to afford it). It is also the most flexible option to study around.
- Family and friends, relying on your greater support network is ideal when you need to do evenings and weekends or even early starts.

Alternatively, get a nanny, use home-based care, an au pair or poor University student- I cannot afford any of these options. Talking to people in a similar boat to you could also be beneficial, you could find a way to share childcare or both contribute towards a nanny or babysitter.

Tips for study

Being well organised is the best thing you can do to get you through medical school and out the other side in one piece. I must admit there have been plenty of times that my organisational skills have been lacking and I ended up making my situation more difficult for myself. Make a study plan and stick to it. This is most important when big exams are coming up or there are multiple assignments due around the same time. Remember, you are not a robot, so only be most regimented when it is most required and schedule in family time.

Treat university like a working week

Come to university between eight and nine every day, even when you have nothing on in order to do any assignments or study you need to. Try to fill all those annoying gaps during the day by doing any amount of work that will make life easier and give you more time to see the kids.

After 'work' is family time

In the evening I go home, tidy up, cook tea, sort out the kids and if I am

lucky I have time to hang out with them a bit. After the kids are in bed, do what school work you need to early then schedule in some personal 'you' time.

Sleep

If you are tired, just go to bed, your productivity will go down if you are tired. Studies have shown that students that watch an episode of 'Friends' the night before an exam do better than those who stay up late studying.

Remember Murphy's Law

It will be exam week when your child wakes in the middle of the night with croup. A child gets sick on average 12 times a year, which is 48 sicknesses in my household a year. Then they make you sick. Stay on top of your work as best as you can. I have spent a lot of time up in the middle of the night with sick kids and it always happens when you need it the least.

Ask for help

Do what you need to do. Most people at university and the hospital are very understanding. Get extensions, ask to come in late. Most doctors who have supervised me during ALM said 'family first'.

Have mental health days

I did not come in to work one day because as a newly solo parent this year I was trying to figure out how I was going to find care for my kids in the mornings when I start at 7:30am for my first run as a house officer. My childcare arrangements with my ex's are complicated, they are reasonably flexible which is great and I am very grateful but I still have arrangements to make. So, on my mental health day I rang my sister, talked to her for an hour, felt sorry for myself, went to visit my aunty, cried on her shoulder, then came up with a plan. I think it is good to be miserable about things that upset you, but only for a little while. Let yourself cry and feel overwhelmed then pick yourself up and make things work. Have a break, read a book, go to a café without the kids, just breathe.

Remember the person who graduates last in their med school class is still a doctor

I am not saying do the minimal amount of work to get through, but rather do not put unrealistic expectations on yourself. You do not need to have an A+ average. As a student with children you already have more life experience than most and that helps you be an empathetic and knowledgeable doctor. It makes Obstetrics, Gynaecology and Paediatrics a lot easier.

Use the kids in your study

When my daughter was four, she laughed so much when I asked her if she was a smoker during a practice interview. The kids love feeling like they are helping out.

Watch Youtube videos

Youtube has everything nowadays. When you are tired or sick, or simply do not have the energy, put a video on. It will help you learn.

Medical school is a lot like a job. If I was not doing this, I would be working full time anyway, or studying something else. It is not a lot different to a usual working week. There are times when I am extremely busy and other times that are more relaxed. Go home early when you can. Cuddle your kids on the couch and watch Peppa Pig. Do not stress the small stuff and get the work done. Medical school is a lot of tick boxes, so tick them and keep going. In reality it is only the start of the medical journey!

Conflict of interest: None

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