

How to enjoy medical school: finding meaning in medicine

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Medical school presents many daunting challenges as a student. The first year is engulfed by fervent swotting for medical school entry, the subsequent two years are spent digesting the wealth of academic and medical knowledge. To top it all off, in the final three years, we are sent into hospitals where we are confronted by the brunt of humanity, both at its best and its worst. This journey can be both enthralling and similarly exhausting.

So, amongst the whirlwind of this great vocational endeavour, what does this leave you?

Young, idealistic and visionary?

Broken, battered and seeking employment/better work hours?

When I was younger, my mother would let me put my ear to her chest. I imagined two inverted lobes splashed in red, pulsing away inside. People told me that the heart was a symbol of love and thus I asked my mother to buy me a stethoscope so that I could hear what love sounded like. She thought that I had wanted to be a doctor, bought me a plastic one and told me to 'wait'.

Heartbeats. It was my second year in medical school that I finally experienced a fulfilment of this childhood dream. Using a stethoscope was probably one of the happiest days of my life. Yet five years down the track, I found that opening a toy doctor's play set as a gift from my supervising General Practitioner (GP) shattered a plaque in my hardening myocardium and brought back memories of those earlier days. Entrained into the processes of hospital procedures, examinations and protocol, I had forgotten the memory of what it was like to experience wonder. So many things that were once unique had become the norm.

For those who have retained a clear vision of why you have gone to medical school, I encourage you to continue with your pursuit. Do not lose it. Keep nurturing it, and let it change and grow - just as you do.

To those who wonder over the process of change that medical school engenders, I speak to you in camaraderie. One cannot commit to a six-year programme, and remain untouched at the other end.

Medical school will challenge your perspective of the world, and of yourself. The great question is how you will choose to respond. Here are a few personal reflections on how to embrace this vocational endeavour and make your life a little easier:

PRE-CLINICAL STUDENTS

Write your goals for what you want out of medical school. Be visionary. Put down the things that you want to do, and try. Document the moments that have given you wonder and make you feel excited. Keep reviewing them. It will keep you inspired when you look back on them as a clinical student, and a doctor during those hard yards.

Get amongst. Spend time with your friends within, and outside of medical school. Being on campus full-time with a cohort that you will spend the next six years with (minimum) is a pretty remarkable opportunity to make some close friends (possible even meet your soulmate). You will be travelling to different parts of the country, and be working alongside each other for a lifetime to come. Your memories together in medical school will be some of the best times of your life. Take opportunities to foster friendships with 'non-medical' friends. They will keep you grounded as you delve deeper into the world of medicine. It only gets busier as a junior doctor!

CLINICAL STUDENTS

Starting the fourth year of medical school is probably one of the biggest leaps in medical school. From spending 'full-time' at university, you are swept up into a world of hospital symphony and you are the junior member of the ward team. Here is a practical tip: Get your House Officer's and Registrar's contact number. Hit them up, stay in touch. It will make your ward rounding experience significantly easier.

The wards. It is exciting, it is new and it is challenging. You are going to have days when you feel like the world's your oyster, and there will be times, when you feel like you are a fly on the wall. Some days, you will question if anyone is experiencing what you are feeling and wonder if what you are doing is right. There will be too many experiences, interactions and moments that you will barely be able to encapsulate into words.

It is OK. Embrace it all. Talk about what you are experiencing with your classmates. You will be surprised to find that you are not the only one feeling that way. Ask for help. Medicine is a long journey, and when you work as a doctor, it is about working as a team. The first step towards learning how to look after patients is learning how to look after yourself. Find yourself a mentor. It is sometimes great to have someone to bounce your thoughts off about vocational aspects of training, and to lend insights into your experiences. I recall walking home after one long day as a fourth-year medical student on her first surgical run and feeling incredibly sleep deprived. I woke up every day, and I went to the hospital. I finished. I went to the gym. I went home. I did the housework and studied. I slept. Each day felt so repetitive. What was I doing? I remember conversing with a registrar about it one evening and he chuckled, telling me that it was what he has been experiencing for years, and giving me added perspectives on the placement. It was immensely helpful to laugh and bounce these thoughts off with somebody who are a few years ahead of me in training. Medicine is an apprenticeship model, and it is about both learning and teaching from each other.

Communication. Talking to other members of your team, and also communicating with your consultant about ward expectations can also help to assuage any unspoken concerns. Having attended the Association for Salaried Medical Specialists conference, and spoken to consultants at this event, it can be true to say that often consultants would welcome engagement from us medical students about the learning experience, as much as we would welcome their input.

Offer yourself as a mentor. The recent years has seen our national medical students' associations recognise the importance of medical student health and wellbeing and the resurgence of various mentorship pathways and wellbeing networks. Get involved.

Auckland Medical School has several mentoring networks established between second and third year medical students, and similarly between fourth year and fifth year medical students. Additionally, there are a number of culturally specific support groups such as the Māori and Pacific Admission Scheme (MAPAS), Young Auckland Chinese Medical Association (YACMA), Christian Medical Fellowship (CMF), Diversity in Practise and Grassroots Rural Health Club. Throughout the year, the Auckland University Medical Students Association (AUMSA) also hosts a number of wellbeing and social events that enable us fellow students to connect. The Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences has similarly revamped their MBChB Portal to include new wellbeing resources the students can access.

Otago Medical School similarly offers second to third year mentoring, fourth to fifth year mentoring, 'study buddy' tutoring programme, 'TI as Teachers' initiative (commencing in 2017) and coffee buddies programme for connecting international students with a local Kiwi.

Nationally, there is an online Women in Medicine Network that the New Zealand Medical Students Association (NZMSA) has kick-started in conjunction with the Association of Salaried Medical Specialists (ASMS). This connects female medical students and physicians at all stages of their training on one platform. A formal relationship is similarly being explored between NZMSA and ASMS on creating a mentoring programme for all medical students to be mentored by a consultant from this organisation. Keep dreaming big. Learn the protocol, but keep thinking of the possibilities. Study what breaks the human heart, but do not underestimate the strength of courage and vulnerability. Allow yourself to experience and share that feeling. Understand what you are experiencing, validate it and figure it out.

When I was a second-year medical student, a fellow Trainee Intern shared these words with me which I never fully understood until this year. I now leave them with you to ponder:

"Never lose that spark and creativity. So many bright, intelligent and creative minds come into medical school and by the fifth year, they are roboticised into thinking that medicine is just one big road map. I mean, a doctor? Anyone can be a doctor – it just comes with being able to do administrative work and diagnosing. However, for some reason, our role accords us with a respected position in society and we have the capacity to use that towards doing and achieving things that others might not. Be excited about being a doctor. Keep up your interests outside of medicine. Never let them beat it out of you. Do not forget to see the bigger picture."

I wish you a fulfilling and brilliant life and medical career.