

Reflective Essay

I find I am regularly asked by friends and family if I am enjoying medicine and of course I always feel obliged to say yes but often struggle to elaborate further. We sit in lectures and we learn pathophysiology, epidemiology, treatments and side-effects then we go to clinical skills sessions and learn long lists of questions that we can recite on demand depending on what we are presented with. Unfortunately none of that really translates into interesting conversation particularly for those with no medical education. The selection process for medicine is challenging and comprehensive, designed to select those that are intelligent, diligent, assertive and empathetic but once you are through those doors all you really need to be able to do is memorise vast quantities of information. On the few occasions when we are encouraged to engage our grey matter participation is poor to say the least and as a peer group we leave our tutors with no option but to spoon-feed us the knowledge required to pass our all-important exams. This is not something I had thought much about but during the first two weeks of Global Health and Humanities (GHH) I discovered how much I have missed using my brain.

Prior to studying medicine I completed a BSc in Anatomical and Physiological Sciences and over the course of that four year degree I developed skills such analytical thinking, learning to question and critique every piece of information I received. We were regularly expected to find and review research articles, picking them apart to discern their true value before interpreting the results. Now two and a half years after graduating I've realised that I miss doing this. From the start of GHH we were encouraged to question the validity of the statistics and data we were shown, to look at the sources and decide if they could be considered a fair representation. When thinking about this I feel that this kind of approach is almost discouraged in medical lectures since we are often given evidence based on large RCTs and in line with national guidelines. I recognise that there are many challenges when developing a medical curriculum and that recent changes have been towards a more interactive and integrated model (MacLeod and Keenan, 2014). While I am not suggesting we should start questioning everything we are taught I think if I was to find a way to incorporate analytical thinking into my studies I would not only enjoy them more but may also enhance my learning capabilities. Perhaps this may be as simple as picking up the student BMJ on a more regular basis or choosing a journal to subscribe to. Previously I

would have felt guilty reading things that weren't directly related to the topic I was studying at the time but I have realised that reading independently about something that is interesting will probably inspire me to work harder at university.

During our first GHH seminar entitled "In-roads to Global Health" Professor Roelf Dijkhuizen quoted one of his own university lecturers as having said "this is where you come to think" and this immediately resonated with me and made me think! Up to this point my perception of medical academia was that you either spent a lot of time in a lab looking down a microscope or you had to conduct audit style research with hours of statistical analysis to wade through. Neither of these options particularly appealed to me but after only four days of GHH I was considering anthropological research as a possible career option. By this point Professor Dijkhuizen was explaining that he felt that medical professionals working in global health could hold a position of great influence and that this could be used to affect change in the political and cultural frameworks of a nation. Although it may be a selfish motivation, the concept of working in a field that could have such an impact is an appealing one. I think having previously dismissed academic work as an option I am now intrigued by the possibility of combining interests. I feel that in the future I could gain great satisfaction from applying the training and knowledge I hopefully will have gained in situations and environments where they have more value. This coincides with the recent efforts to encourage medical universities to take more responsibility for action on global health, particularly as they have the advantage of being less influenced by politics (Adli et al., 2010).

In the second seminar of the same series Dr Julia Hussein spoke to us about her unique career in global health and implored us to "explore every avenue until you realise you don't like it". Again I found myself considering how this applied to my career ambitions and that perhaps I am already scaling them back because I already assume that you can't have it all. I feel that as students we are only ever presented with a very rigid career pathway and the cynic in me suspects this is because that's what best suits the NHS. In reality I am beginning to realise that there are many ways to incorporate different interests into a medical career (Day, 2013) and that perhaps it is best to see what opportunities present and let it develop from there.

The most recent guest speaker we heard from was also the most inspirational. Professor James N'Dow spoke with such passion and enthusiasm that it was impossible not to feel

motivated. I was particularly moved by his advocacy of a holistic approach to surgery (Atayoglu et al., 2014) and when he stated that “everything must apply to patient care” and “that is the priority” he explained that he extends this not only to his clinical work but also his academic work. I think it can be easy to become detached from the realities that patients face and Professor N’Dow is inspiring in his refusal to let this happen, particularly with respect to appreciating what is of greatest concern to the patient. This is a key part of the doctor-patient relationship and is termed devotion (Toader and Damir, 2014). He is already in a position of influence and he is using it to advocate for the care he believes his patients should receive but he reminded us of the “mammoth responsibility” we will also have. I think the best doctors are those who passionately believe in what they do and after listening to Professor N’Dow I think that combining work in global health with clinical work and academic work is my ultimate goal, however achievable that may be! He urged us to “go beyond the boundaries” and “explore new prospects” and this is something that I hope to be able to take forward through the rest of my studies and into my medical career.

Each of the guest speakers we heard from has created a unique career with their passion for global health and I think it was really obvious that there isn’t any one proscribed way to integrate what you are passionate about. I chose the global health module for my student selected component because I was particularly interested in learning more about medical responses to humanitarian crises and the challenges that go with this, however at the end of the course I find I have a greater interest in global health in general.

In the short-term I think that the most important lesson I will gain from my humanities block is my realisation that I miss using the skills that I developed in my first degree and that I need to make a conscious effort to challenge myself regularly. As medical students we have a high workload and most of us also balance extra-curricular activities but if I make the time to pick up a journal and read around some of my topics of study perhaps I will find the studying more fulfilling. Currently this seems achievable and I hope that it may also motivate me to work harder in the rest of my medical studies. I have developed an interest in both global health and anthropological research, both of which I had not considered previously. As I progress through medical school I am giving more consideration to the career choices I will have to make in the future and trying to explore as many options as possible. I have enjoyed learning about how the careers of some of the clinicians that spoke

to us have evolved into so much more and in the future I will actively seeking out opportunities so that I can do the same.

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References

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