Universal needs

As someone who appreciates the variety that life offers, it would be true to say Queensland GP Dr Deborah Sambo is taking advantage of that diversity.

Born in Nigeria and subsequently travelling and working around the globe, Dr Sambo has been exposed to a range of cultures and their unique healthcare systems. After experiencing many aspects of general practice, including group practice, private practice, contract work, and mixed-billing and bulk-billing clinics, she now operates as a solo practitioner.

However, Dr Sambo wasn’t always certain that she wanted to pursue a career in the field of medicine. ‘I guess you grow up wanting to be either a doctor, lawyer or engineer,’ she told Good Practice. ‘I always wanted to go to university, but didn’t know what I necessarily wanted to study. Medicine came on top.’

After graduating from medical school in Nigeria, Dr Sambo moved to Finland to study a Master of Public Health before moving to Australia in 2001.

Despite something of an initial culture shock, including adjusting to the hot Australian weather after the colder climate of Finland, Dr Sambo was fortunate to start work in a practice owned by a woman who became her mentor.

‘It was a wonderful experience,’ she said. ‘She taught me most of the things I know that weren’t in the text book, so to speak. ‘She spent quite some time explaining the framework of the way the system is organised and making sure I was guided in how everything went. And, clinically, she was always there, always available, very generous with her time and just really wonderful.

‘I wish everyone would have that kind of experience first off. That really helped to stabilise things.’

Going solo

After settling in Queensland and working as a GP in various practices, Dr Sambo decided to take the plunge and set up her own practice in Deception Bay, part of the Moreton Bay region north of Brisbane, which she has now been running for five years. Like most new businesses, the practice wasn’t without its challenges.

‘I started it from scratch. I didn’t take over from an existing practice,’ Dr Sambo explained. ‘I’d like to say it was nice and easy, but it was actually a very time-consuming task [and] there were lots of naysayers who said, “You couldn’t possibly do it”, “It’s going to be hard, working alone, a lady with a family”. So all the negatives got thrown in my face.

‘But, in spite of all of that, I had the full support of my family and my original mentor who, at critical times, were telling me, “You can do it”.’

This difficult process also taught Dr Sambo some valuable life lessons.

‘Just get out there, give it your best and know that you have given it your best shot,’ she said.

‘I’ve always seen myself as a doer. I think that if you’ve got the opportunity you have to grab it by the hand … and owning a practice is what I always felt that I wanted to do.’

Dr Sambo’s determination paid off. She now has a loyal following of patients, most of whom she has known for close to 12 years.

‘I know most of my patients by name and I must say that I’m really quite blessed in the fact that I’m able to have that relationship with my patients,’ she said.

Dr Sambo has also retained that fundamental element that keeps her satisfied – the variety of general practice.

‘I enjoy the variation it gives,’ she said. ‘General practice never gets boring because you never know what’s going to walk in through the door, or who’s going to walk in or what they’re doing. You need to piece everything together and come up with a solution.

‘So, for me, every day that I wake up and go to work, that just keeps me going; never knowing. It doesn’t get boring.’

Dr Deborah Sambo values her patients as individuals and strives to accommodate their diverse requirements.
**More than a number**

Although Dr Sambo does feel there is nothing like general practice to highlight people’s diversity, she believes human beings have the same fundamental needs.

‘You grow up knowing that countries differ. Even New Zealand is just next door [to Australia], but if one goes over there to practise medicine there will be a few things that will be different,’ she said.

‘So it’s important to approach anywhere you practise with an open mind and a willingness to learn and to see things in a different light, while appreciating the interconnectedness of mankind.’

‘There are differences in all places but, ultimately, the human condition is essentially the same. The things that change are mostly cultural and maybe social, but there’s not a whole lot of difference when it comes to managing the human being.’

It is with this outlook that Dr Sambo has acquired such a devoted catalogue of patients who appreciate the time she gives them and the fact she is always willing to go that extra mile.

‘You’re on a journey with a patient, you know them and they know you and they know what to expect,’ she said. ‘You’re not just a one-off that they go off to see, and they are not just a number.

‘That’s an area of general practice that really gives me great joy, where you’re quite able to connect and tie the dots together in a way no other specialty allows.’

**The next generation**

Dr Sambo feels that as long as there are people who value the services GPs provide, it will keep general practice thriving and inspire the younger generation of doctors to achieve their dreams, like venturing out to start their own practice.

Her advice for GPs with such ambitions rings true with her own life principles.

‘I’d just like to tell the younger ones who are trying to come into the field and set up their own practices that, if that’s part of what they set as their goals or dreams, then they should go for it,’ she said.

‘They should do their research, speak with experienced people, listen attentively to learn from those who have done it before, and just take the plunge.’

Adhering to these principles certainly paid off for Dr Sambo.

‘I’m happy that I stuck with my plans,’ she said. ‘Obviously it’s not easy, but it’s that sense of satisfaction that you’re able to stick to the plan and actually get something off the ground.’

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— Dr Deborah Sambo, RACGP member since 2002.

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