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Advice for an adventurous career

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All men dream: but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dream with open eyes, to make it possible. T E Lawrence¹

Prescribed career paths are not for everyone and there are other, less obvious options that can lead to an interesting and varied career. Below are some reflections on my own career aimed at helping doctors of tomorrow find their way – especially if they are prepared to work in remote or developing world settings and possibly follow a path toward working in public health.

Do what interests you

Passion will drive you through any hardship or 'not so well paid' position. One job I had involved crisscrossing the Nile, travelling up the Congo and crossing a desert in Yemen to interview refugees fleeing various conflicts, about their health needs and provide recommendations to United Nations agencies about the care of refugees.

Don't feel you have to follow the crowd

If you choose to work in unpopular jobs, you are usually free to be creative and can quickly become an expert. New

colleges are often developed to fill a void, to gather together those with skills and experiences that are not yet adequately recognised.

Identify areas of need

Reporting on emerging issues is a duty: doctors have a responsibility to the community (local, national or global) to report outbreaks, potential epidemics or people at risk. Working to prevent an outbreak or to reduce a risk can become your new horizon – as was the case with me with human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) after I witnessed its impact in Malawi 20 years ago.

Learn to write

Writing is an essential skill, as is touch typing: whether it's for the media, a 'ministerial' response, or a funding proposal, many doctors discover they enjoy writing. A colleague who began writing for *Australian Doctor* 15 years ago quickly became a major contributor to print, online and radio media. Now he's also a popular speaker who gives motivational sessions to fellow general practitioners based on his clinical experiences.

Characterise your practice

Primary care offers a working environment that should reflect a doctor's personal view of medicine. Some doctors even form



Indonesia HIV Prevention and Care Project – harm reduction/prisons team

nongovernment organisations to promote causes they are passionate about and to ensure they are working in an organisation that reflects their values and interests.

Get experience

A range of experiences is traditionally provided through structured training placements but working in a completely different setting can be more powerful, eg. working as a volunteer in a hardship post or as a locum in a remote outback practice. This helps to develop 'a different way of thinking' and helps to 'organise knowledge' – one of the unique aspects of rural medicine.²

Create a career narrative

Every position in my career seems to have relied upon all my previous posts. Medicine is uniquely suited to career change. Variety is important but so is understanding how experiences fit together. Use every part of your experience to enrich your practice, even the negative experiences.

Take risks in your career choices

Ultimately, you will be rewarded for taking the road less travelled. My adventure started over 20 years ago after reading a newspaper

advertisement for health officers in Africa. A few months later at the height of the dry season, I was driving through a dusty African landscape to Lake Malawi to commence work as a public health officer. That experience changed my life. I probably learned everything essential for working in development and public health in those 4 years. Many websites (eg. unjobs.org) are helpful for finding jobs that appeal to your particular interests.

Find a mentor

A mentor may be appointed by your college, a colleague you respect, or someone with

particular experience outside the profession. You may need several mentors at different points in your career or for different aspects of your development. I once received timely advice during a job interview in which the interview panel and I realised the job I'd applied for was unsuitable for me. We used the opportunity to discuss more appropriate career options. A mentor who understands where you want to go can advocate on your behalf when you want to make that unorthodox leap. An important mentor convinced me it was time to do a master of public health and then facilitated me completing it through field research in Africa.

Summary

To have a medical career that is outside the box it pays to do what you are interested in. Don't follow the crowd, pursue different experiences, and create a career narrative. On the way, take the opportunity to identify new areas of need. Learn to write and characterise your practice of medicine. Take risks with your career – you are allowed to be inspired.

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Prisoners in the clinic of Cipinang Narcotics Prison: Jakarta, Indonesia



Islamic clerics who promote methadone and clean syringes for young drug users: Yili, Xinjiang Province, China

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