

# Where did I go right?

## A career as a rural doctor, wife and mother

I have tried to work out when I first thought, 'I want to be a doctor'. I certainly know that I was young. It may have been the time I was playing doctors and nurses with the boy from across the road! But surely my career ambition can't stem from the pure rage I felt when he told me that girls can't be doctors. Can it?

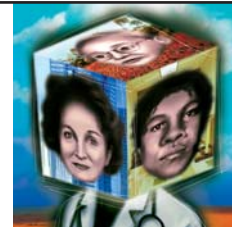
Whatever the nature of my initial impulse, I was reasonably rational as a secondary school student choosing a career. I wanted a job helping people and involving science, where I would be able to work independently. I watched the local doctor who was a family friend. In our small town, he did most things. He delivered me and my siblings, saved my sister when she had measles encephalitis, removed my tonsils, and jabbed us all yearly with the flu vaccine. He even removed my appendix 'just before they burst'. He saved my life! He was a hero. I wanted to be just like him.

Now I'm a woman of 40 plus years, married to

Anthony, the man I fell in love with just as I finished my university course. We are a family of six; two doctors and their four children. We live and work in Camperdown (*Figure 1a-c*), a Victorian town of 3500 people, many thousand dairy cows and a solid sense of community. The town is small enough that, on either of my 'at home days', Anthony will know where I've been before he leaves work. Not because I've rung him, but because patients will tell him they've seen the family doing this or that, and haven't they grown? A child's tantrum can make headlines in Camperdown. Let me describe for you a day here like many others.

Our youngest child is awake at 6 am crashing about with something that sounds like a guitar that needs to be tuned. I would like to sleep on, but so would my husband Anthony who is sleeping with a pillow over his head. He was on call this weekend and his sleep deficit is greater than mine. Four children can create a maelstrom of readers, breakfasts, lunches to cut, school projects to find and kisses and tears. It is well after 9 am when I stagger into the hospital trying to reconstruct myself as a thoughtful and methodical doctor.

Each working day I do the round of our 35 bed public hospital to see those patients admitted under my bed card. Today there is Robert, a diabetic with ischaemic heart disease, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, chronic hepatitis and even more chronic anxiety neurosis; and Kate, a mother of two gorgeous children and now one blissfully beautiful baby. Kate is pleased with the rapid uneventful labour she had 2 days ago and so am I. Innocence is a thing we only value when it is lost. A few months ago, I delivered a baby to a teenage mother who I had seen for the first time the day before. Twelve hours after we had both laughed at her baby kicking hard against my examining hand, I delivered the baby, blue and lifeless onto the labour ward couch; we didn't hear a fetal heart beat when she arrived labouring hard. I will never forget the strength and courage of that young girl



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**Figure 1a. Clock Tower, Camperdown**  
Photo courtesy John Hamilton, Gateway BBS, Camperdown



**Figure 1b. Mt. Sugarloaf, Camperdown**  
Photo courtesy John Hamilton, Gateway BBS, Camperdown



**Figure 1c. Lakes and scenery, Camperdown**  
Photo courtesy John Hamilton, Gateway BBS, Camperdown

coping with a grief as profound as any we can face. It was my privilege to be her doctor and walk some of that path with her.

But today is a good day. Nathan, a 5 year old, is running up and down the corridor. The 'run by' diagnosis is a full recovery. On Friday he was a flat, seriously dehydrated boy. I tell his mother she can take him home now and I hie myself off to the clinic as fast as my legs can pedal. It's a glorious downhill run, which sets my handlebar streamers flying! The streamers are a gift from a patient with borderline personality disorder. One day when she abused me for keeping her waiting, she said: 'You only keep me coming back so you can pay off your BMW'. 'Me drive a BMW!' I exclaimed, 'Haven't you seen the old granny's bike I ride?' The following week she brought me an early Christmas present – 'Barbie' pink handlebar streamers!

Anthony's bike is already in the bike rack. The senior partner's sporty MG is parked nearby. I am late again. I am old enough to know that no one can change your bad habits for you; time management is something I have not yet mastered. I live in hope!

I take a deep breath and charge at the day. Pap tests, pill prescriptions, weight checks, blood pressure reviews, a footballer's knee and a netballer's elbow. The knee's a torn cartilage on history alone, but I need the X-ray to prove that there's a supracondylar fracture of the humerus. No wonder that kept him awake all night. He's a natural comic and has me in stitches even before I have him in plaster. I grab a cup of coffee and a biscuit before I tackle the squamous cell carcinoma on the back of an old digger's shoulder. He won't go to the big smoke to get it taken off and I wouldn't really want to send him because I enjoy the challenge of a rotation flap.

So much for working just the morning on Monday! There are phone calls and emails. I'm on the board of The Australian College of Rural and Remote Medicine as Director of Women In Rural Practice and we've a survey that I'll be presenting to the next board meeting for approval.

I get a phone call from Ivy's daughter. Ivy has suddenly got a lot sicker. She can't get out of bed today,

she's breathless and can't control her bladder. Do I think it's the ovarian cancer spreading to her lungs? So here I am making a house call on my way home to check Ivy and see if there's measures we can put in place to make Ivy's daughter's life a bit easier. Let's see, the district nurse is in each morning, but it is exhausting washing sheets and cooking meals that go half eaten. I arrange home help and hospital linen and meals on wheels. X-rays are ordered and antibiotics prescribed, and I'm off sprinting up the hill.

There are lots of people out and about in the afternoon sunshine. I'm waving to half the town here. I ride in the gate just as my daughter arrives home from school on her bike. Her younger brother trails along halfway down the street doing wheelies on his scooter. I've made it. That's half the day done, now I've got the ballet run, dinner, baths and bedtime stories. If I'm awake enough later on, I might slip in half an hour reading articles for my research project on rural obstetrics, but Anthony and I didn't see much of each other this weekend so I think I'd rather sit down and catch up over a glass of red wine.

So here I am. The rural doctor, just like I wanted to be. But is it really? No it isn't ... I thought I could be a doctor for my community like Dr David Hodson was for the community I grew up in. But here I am, a rural procedural doctor, a wife, a mother, a medico-politician, and a student. I didn't ever imagine my life would be as complex as it is, nor did I understand how rewarding this life could be, how invigorating, how joyful, how humbling or how empowering. Aren't I blessed?

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