



Studying ... Medicine?

Lois Oliver

If you're reading this, you are probably applying to medical school, have just opened some A-levels results or are already at medical school. Whichever one it is you want to study medicine and become a doctor. And what an honour that is! Despite the current 'doctor bashing' in the press I can honestly say I love my job.

As a medic, in the next 4–6 years, you will see babies being born, visit hospices, stand in theatres assisting surgery, discuss intimate problems with strangers and witness what alcohol and drugs can really do in excess. Above all you will be studying something that will give you a glimpse into our Creator's handiwork – human beings! For those of us who are Christians this means that we are given great opportunities to reach others for God's kingdom.

So why are you studying medicine? Money, your Dad's a doctor, they suggested it at school, you like helping people, you're a people person? Maybe you felt it was a particular calling. Certainly some Christian medics have a vision to study medicine in order to further God's Kingdom on the other side of the world. But as a Christian medic your first years of study are an opportunity where your faith can be put into action, challenged and grow.

Being a Christian puts you in a unique position during your time at medical school. You have an ethical foundation on which everything from day-to-day patient contact to future legal and scientific developments can be based. As a Christian you know the true meaning and value of a human life. This means that whether you are dealing with death, addiction, new life, dementia or genetics

there is a reference guide in God's Word, the Bible.

However, when such issues crop up, the Christian response is often seen as alien by our colleagues: Creation versus Darwinism, pro-life versus choice, physician assisted suicide versus loving end-of-life care and 'hot topics' like sexuality, fertility treatment, cloning and contraception.

No other area is more challenging than medical ethics. At medical school you may think you are being taught to dismiss the existence of God in favour of rational scientific enquiry, Darwinism and the exaltation of choice. Being the only one in a lecture hall against abortion can be difficult, but it's even more difficult when you have to attend the clinics and explain your reasons for not assisting. There are many 'hot topics' in the ethical arena but I've divided them into five groups and hopefully they will give you some pointers.

1. Beginning of life

'When does life begin?' and 'What is the status of the embryo?' are probably the two key questions in any beginning of life debate. Knowing where you stand on these subjects will have a huge impact on your later medical practise.

Christians know they are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27). He created us in our mother's womb (Psalm 139), and at that point he made us into a new, unique being that developed in the womb and then out into adulthood. Christians are called to respect God's creation and never to kill innocent life. So what about pre-natal diagnosis to avoid a child being born with Huntington's chorea? Or embryonic stem cell research to find a cure for Alzheimer's disease? Or the simple contraceptive coil?

As Christian medics the answers you give to the two earlier questions can impact ethical dilemmas in most specialities. The following links will help you delve deeper:

<http://www.cmf.org.uk/ethics/>

www.prolife.org.uk

2. End of life

Physician assisted suicide (or Euthanasia) has been very much in the press over the last few years as Lord Joffe has attempted to get his Bill

through parliament. This would make it legal for doctors to assist their patients' ending of their own life. Surely if a patient gives permission to end their life it is morally correct?

This, unfortunately, is a widely held view in our autonomous society. Our generation no longer holds the biblical view that mankind is made in God's image and therefore has a responsibility to maintain the sanctity of human life (Genesis 9:6), despite the cost.

A good website on this subject is:

www.carenotkilling.org.uk

3. Mad, bad or sad

Medical students will come across people who are 'mad', a lot of people who are 'sad' and many who are 'bad'. Anti-social behaviour fills our A&E wards at the weekends and substance abuse fills them even further. Christian medics must be very careful not to be judgemental. In a fallen world, what should the Christian response be to the drunken man seen in A&E, who has put his wife in hospital because as a child he saw his father hit his mother?

It is important for students to grasp God's view on addictions, substance abuse, depression and eating disorders (to name a few), so that as doctors they can care for those suffering. Indeed medical staff are not immune from any of the above, and a clear view on these topics can be a form of prophylaxis.

An interesting debate in Christian circles (and Hollywood studios) is the existence of the demonic. While I wouldn't like to venture into this subject here, I will direct you once again to the [Mad, Bad or Sad? A Christian approach to antisocial behaviour and mental disorder](#), edited by M. Dominic Beer and Nigel D. Pocock.

4. Healing

Christians believe in miracles. God's healing power is miraculous. There are many biblical examples of healing. There is nothing stopping God from raising the dead and healing the sick today. Medics sometimes only think of physical healing, but the Bible explains that healing is far deeper than physical healing. There is spiritual healing, healing of grief and healing of nations.

Christians should be Godly in their studies and if, as students, they build good practices such as praying for their patients and seeking God's guidance in patients' management they stand in good stead when they start on the wards as junior doctors. CMF run a fantastic course called [Saline Solution](#), which touches on the above. It also gives guidance about how to best reach patients for God.

5. Alternative Medicine

As a student I didn't pay much attention to alternative medicines. It didn't appear in my academic studies, nor in my involvement with CMF, church and UCCF. However I wish it had. Today, many people are looking to alternative remedies. What's the harm? If a bit of acupuncture works, or if homeopathy does no harm, why is there all the fuss? Unfortunately the basis of most alternative medical remedies is based on eastern religions using the life force theory. When life force (a non-physical force) is flowing freely in the body, the body is in health; if it is blocked it causes disease. The use of alternative therapies carries with it a spiritual danger of pulling us away from our faith. Mark Pickering, CMF's student secretary, has written a brilliant article on [alternative medicine](#). It shows how much alternative medicine is out there and how much of it is used.

If the five areas above all seem a bit daunting, then can I recommend you read just two books if you are heading off to medical school. They are Professor John Wyatt's book www.cmf.org.uk and it is a very rich resource for Christian medics. They also provide great pastoral support, and a fantastic annual student's conference, besides much else.

During your six years of study you might fancy mixing with non-medics! A good church should remain central to your Christian walk at medical school. During the six years you will face other highs and lows which aren't medical. Here a good church base will help you as well as providing teaching and opportunities for regular prayer and worship. I also personally feel that church ensures you don't put medicine on a pedestal. At church people saw me as a student who happened to be studying medicine, not as a medical student. I am

forever thankful for Sunday lunches alongside some very wise and mature Christian men and women of south London!

Towards the end of medical school you'll be likely to have a 3 to 4 month elective period where you can go and study anything, anywhere. As a Christian this can be used as an opportunity to visit the overseas mission field, study a particular ethical dilemma (there are some great courses at Queen Mary's in Twickenham), or work in something medically related like a rape crisis centre in the UK. These opportunities are supported through CMF and its sister organisation, [Healthserve](#). They will even help you find funding for the long haul trip. Sometimes these trips are simply an opportunity to witness medical mission work, whilst gaining practical skills and embracing a completely new culture for a few months. Sometimes God uses these trips to water a seed, already planted, about the possibility of long term overseas mission as a medic.

Before you know it, your elective will be over and you will be sitting finals and applying for jobs. Unfortunately you are no longer guaranteed a job as a doctor in the UK. Medicine has always been competitive but due to some horrific NHS job planning there seems to be too many doctors in the NHS at present. The year 2007 was a disaster for junior doctors, with everyone having to re-apply for jobs, often without CVs or interviews. There were tens of thousands of applicants for 18,000 jobs with some competition ratios in excess of 30 to 1. Married couples were split up, parents were sent to posts three hours from their families and many people either didn't get a job or it was only a temporary one. Some left to go overseas, but many with other commitments couldn't just leave and became very disheartened. Unfortunately it seems that in 2008 the competition will be even higher, although the system may be a little fairer.

But don't be disheartened. Medicine is still a fantastic career, which I wouldn't change for the world. I wish you every success and God's blessings!

Recommended books and articles

The recommended books can be obtained from the Christian Medical Fellowship [online](#)

[bookstore](#).

, edited by M. Dominic Beer and Nigel D. Pocock (CMF, 2006).

, Professor John Wyatt (IVP & CMF, 2000).

[Hard Questions about Health and Healing](#), Andrew Fergusson (London: CMF, 2005).

[What's the alternative?](#) Mark Pickering, Nucleus January 2006.

Useful websites

<http://www.cmf.org.uk/>

<http://www.prolife.org.uk/>

www.carenotkilling.org.uk

<http://www.healthserve.org/>

Lois Oliver studied at St George's, University of London and is now a junior doctor in Portsmouth, training to be a GP.

If you need any further reasons to consider joining CMF, read Mark Pickering's article "[Ten reasons why Christian medics need CMF](#)"