

Role models can have an enormous influence on students and young doctors, as **Jane and Jes Bates** recall

Standing on the shoulders of giants

Over the years we discover how much our paths and perspectives are shaped by people who have gone before. As a medical student involved with ICMDA I met some remarkable medical role models: great people of God like Paul Brand, Keith Sanders and Dennis Burkitt to name a few. All dedicated some of their best years to work overseas.

Paul Brand was a gentle, humble man of great wisdom and intelligence who pioneered reconstructive surgery in leprosy. He loved and respected his wife Margaret and they worked closely together as a team. He was prepared to live simply. At one planning meeting for the ICMDA World Congress he made it clear that he wasn't comfortable with the divide created between delegates. Until then people from poorer countries attending the congress stayed in a hostel whilst richer doctors booked into 5 star hotels. Paul suggested all should rather stay together in the hostel to learn from one another for the sake of Christ's fellowship.

He once told a story that is like a modern parable. After some years he and his wife moved from India to the US. While walking in their neighbourhood they often saw rubbish lying around. At first they grumbled, feeling thoroughly smug about how they wouldn't do such a thing. Then one day they felt Jesus telling them to collect up the rubbish themselves. They resisted for a while but then they began to see afresh how Jesus had already cleared up the 'rubbish' from their lives and they were humbled. I was touched by the way prominent Christian people make their lives subject to him even in this small, practical way.

My husband Jes and I realised with increasing conviction from these early days that God was calling us to work overseas. It was an important shared vision for our life together. We made various short term trips and joined prayerful mission minded churches. However it takes time to prepare. After qualifying, Jes spent four years in basic surgical training. I did a variety of SHO jobs including spells in anaesthetics, and obstetrics and gynaecology, plus my GP registrar year and MRCGP.

In 1998 we went to the ICMDA World Congress in Durban and six months later returned South Africa, working at Ngwelezane hospital in KwaZulu Natal as a trial period for work overseas. Jes was an orthopaedic trainee and at night was on call for anything surgical with a lot of gun shot wounds and other trauma. I spent time in anaesthetics, community health and paediatrics, with the dawning realisation that we were working in one of the world epicentres for HIV/AIDS. This work became my passion.

Spiritual dryness is an issue for doctors. For 2-3 years Jes wasn't really praying or reading the Bible. We went to church but it

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seemed like just going through the motions. What kept him going was that he believed God had a plan and had called us to work overseas. There came a point, however, where we needed to take stock and time out from work to focus on 'getting back to God'. We wanted to build a firmer foundation in our faith alongside our professional knowledge. So after two years in South Africa we applied to All Nations Christian College to do the Certificate in Biblical and Cross Cultural Studies.

People are often key to the next step. We had imagined we would work with a mission organisation such as Interserve. However, after praying over one Christmas holiday, we contacted Jim Harrison, an orthopaedic surgeon and friend already working in Malawi. When we arrived Jes found he could complete postgraduate training within the region. The vision for HIV care that God began to show me in South Africa is now becoming a reality. Through our work in the government teaching hospital we seek to make God's love known.

What we have done has meant stepping out of the standard UK career path. Being away from family, especially taking grandchildren far away, is hard at times but compared to stories from previous centuries we have the advantages of rapid communication - phone, email, and even texting - but the miles still exist.

With my work in HIV/AIDS I sometimes feel like the boy who gave his loaves and fishes to Jesus who then did amazing things with the small offering. Early on we learnt that to work overseas did not require 'super-spiritual' people, but obedience and openness to God if that was his call. From those who have gone before we can see that God is faithful to provide for all our needs even at the end of a career overseas.

It may be that in the 21st century it is difficult to hear God's call amidst the many voices which clamour for our attention, but it is exciting to follow him, and definitely not to be missed

Jes and Jane Bates are medical missionaries in Malawi