

By Brian Hogbin

# A to Z of stress and time management



**I** have worked as a general surgeon who is a follower of Jesus. The last ten years were related mostly to patients with breast problems. In retirement it's been possible to look back and review how I had tried to manage my life. What emerged has been a rather mixed selection of principles and helpful hints, presented here from A – Z. My prayer is that this will help you to keep control of your life and not always be squeezed by others. *'Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.'* (Rom 12:2)

**Aims for life** – Know where you are going - you are more likely to get there. Important for everyone but especially for followers of Jesus.

**Be prepared** – Plan ahead. Anticipate the effect of your proposed actions.

**Communicate carefully** – Convey choices. Allow options for patients. She may have different priorities. With seemingly identical breast cancers one patient would see it as obvious that she needed a mastectomy but the other would insist on lumpectomy.

**Death** – 'Few people die wishing they had spent more time at the office'. Keep assessing priorities and sail with an eye on the compass not the storm.

**Extra staff** – Be ahead of colleagues in asking for more staff unless your patients have a *fully* adequate service. Extraordinary excuses will be found for not requesting enlargement of the consultant grade - though colleagues will deny it is related to diluting the private practice.

**Fast vs slow** – In all of life we need to speed up on the easy bits and remember to slow for the difficult bits.

**Gradients** – Control them! The general attitude today is 'down' to patients and 'up' to just a few 'above' us! However, before God, every one else is equal to me. What a difference this should make to my interactions with patients. As a consultant relating to the chief executive or the latest government directive my first responsibility is to God. This gives me a freedom some colleagues lack.

**Holy: the sabbath** – Value rest: 'Six days you shall labour and do all your work' (Ex 20:9) the fourth of ten *equal* commandments. Guard Sunday at all costs from non-urgent medical work, including all sorts of paper work, writing, reading or anything else medical. And work out the implications of being on call!

**Innovate** – Embrace change which you anticipate will still be here in 5 years. Think of new ways to make life easier. Audio taping my 'bad news' consultation for the patient allowed me to move on with the technical details and options faster and it facilitated sharing the news with the family that evening. Building a Breast Care Centre and appointing Breast Care Nurses meant that the work ran much more smoothly.

**Jane - My other half** – Not just a platitude but a statement of reality – an essential balance to my own foibles. Protect this relationship above all else.

**Kind or Good doctor** – What does the patient want? Either/or. Both/and.

**Love** – Love God: God's key to freedom and good healthy abundant living! Love your neighbour: Yes, but reflect regularly on what it means for you each day.

**Management** – God loves managers as well! Co-operate and be

involved as an aspect of serving the patient by changing the systems for better outcomes. Go the extra mile in the NHS instead of seeing more private patients.

**Money** – Decide where to be different...and how to achieve it.

Private schooling, progressively enlarging house, expensive holidays....? Less private work; controlled work and spending - it can be done.

**Nice** – Love your enemy - sleep on it. Send the letter tomorrow.

Always talk. In hospital life there is a lot of scope for misunderstanding and disagreement with any staff but especially other doctors. When this happens go out of your way to see them and to speak ...not about the difficult subject but about something different and non contentious so they have to find themselves agreeing with you. It re-establishes contact.

**No** – Say no whenever necessary. Accept invitations of all sorts with care.

**Origami** – Keep your outside interests alive.

**Perfection** – The pursuit of perfection is the enemy of the possible. A reasonable compromise allows progress... but this does not apply to matters covered by Matthew 5:48!

**Quiet Time** – Daily prayer and Bible reading essential for getting life into perspective - the key to an orderly day.

**Retire at 60!** – Or at least reduce the workload. I have not so much *retired* as *re-attired* to a different life.

**Systems** – No mistake should happen a third time.

Make lists of jobs and decide priorities.

**Time** – Make time to escape from medicine, church and family to be alone with your spouse. We did this on Tuesdays. Get a baby sitter if needed. See it as a prior appointment in your diary so if asked to do something else you are simply not available. Family and 'church' also need planned and protected time!

**Urgent items** – Beware of telephone requests for help. They always sound urgent and worthy but may squeeze out the important. As a policy never say yes to do anything extra on the phone. 'I will call you back' or 'Please put it in writing' ...anything may help till you have a chance to put the request in perspective and check with your spouse, secretary, etc.

**Value the team** – There may be tension ...but not conflict.

Especially value your secretary. In the private sector pay well, and for rather more hours than you expect to be worked. Be happy to use this time for some work to be typed that should be done in the NHS such as the report which you need typed.

**What if... and Why** – Always ask 'why?' Keep asking questions and challenging accepted wisdom. Ask 'Is that really what the article showed?'

**X = an unknown quantity** – Usually the work behind a seemingly innocent request. Beware!

**Yes/No** – As Jesus said. 'Let your yes be yes and your no be no'...Be straightforward in your answer and keep your word, even when highly inconvenient. This makes you more careful what you promise next time!

**Zeal** – Defined as 'fervour in advancing a cause'. What is your 'cause' Back to A and start again.

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