



CMF

Christian Medical Fellowship

Surviving the Foundation Years





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Surviving the Foundation Years

Adapted from an address by Peter Saunders, CMF Student Secretary, at the ICMDA World Congress in Durban July 1998.

Introduction

My house-officer year was one of the most stressful years of my life, but also one of most thrilling, challenging and formative.

I'd done my medical training in my home city Auckland, New Zealand; where I'd been a member of a large youth group and solid Bible believing church. Our Christian Union was keen and supportive - we met regularly for prayer and Bible study and actively witnessed and had the privilege of seeing several of our classmates come to faith.

I'd been involved in leadership both at church and in CU, had been brought up in a strong Christian home, and been well grounded in the scriptures.

But my first job was in a 500 bed hospital 250 miles from home, I didn't know any of the other house staff, or indeed any other staff in the hospital. In fact I knew no-one in the town.

I was too far from home to travel back for weekends and it was expensive to phone. There were three other Christian doctors at the hospital but two were newly married and I was conscious of not wanting to intrude. The other was struggling in his faith and later drifted right out of Christian fellowship into a gay lifestyle.

There were Christian churches in the town but none of them bore much resemblance to what I was used to; that of my own denomination was small and most of the congregation were elderly.

The other house officers were pleasant enough to work with; indeed the whole hospital had something of a community feel but colleagues' lifestyles left much to be desired.

I survived by the grace of God; but had to learn to sink or swim in the process. At the end of that year I married Kirsty (another Christian doctor from home); and some other Christian staff came. By that time I was well settled and the second year was much easier.

Several years ago the CMF published a discussion paper titled 'The Christian Doctor - an endangered species' in response to the allegedly large number of junior Christian doctors who were losing their faith during the clinical years of training or during house-jobs. For the majority of those who had given up the chief reason given was that God had become irrelevant. 'No time' was the other main cause for dropout.

The pressures on junior doctors are immense; and include pressures that are social, psychological and spiritual.

The social pressures come from being away from our traditional supports of family,

friends, church, Christian Union and home. The new 'support group' of junior doctors we find ourselves in often has a very different 'world-view' and a very different way of relaxing and coping with pressure. There is a great desire to be accepted and therefore a great temptation to conform.

The psychological pressures arise from the struggle to maintain self esteem while struggling to acquire new skills in a high demand environment; the long hours and lost sleep and large number of superficial contacts with a wide variety of staff and patients produce the lethal combination of tiredness and loneliness.

The spiritual pressures are those of finding and adjusting to a new church and a new circle of Christian friends (if there are other Christians), the difficulty of maintaining time with God and the ample opportunity there is to create a new identity for ourselves and compromise morally.

Overall junior doctors face more pressures than they have ever met before in their lives and have less in the way of supports to cope with them. It's not surprising that there is a high casualty rate. If you are up to your neck in it, so to speak, then it may only take a small wave to drown you!

However, for God, crisis simply means challenge; the foundation years provide a tremendous opportunity for him to teach us and help us grow in our faith and become more effective instruments in his service.

If you subject a lump of carbon to huge pressure; you may just get coal dust, but you may also get a diamond. Similarly foundation jobs can make us or break us. What can we do so that foundation jobs make us the sort of doctors, and the sort of people God wants us to be?

In short, if we want to avoid the pitfalls, the answer is very simple.

When I was a boy we used to take our holidays in New Zealand in an old gold mining town on the coast where the surrounding farmland was riddled with mineshafts; and one of our favourite activities was to explore these abandoned diggings. Most of the dangerous shafts had been sealed off for safety reasons but I can remember one day wandering into a mine and nearly stepping into a vertical shaft opening in the floor. Being lads with a sense of adventure we came back with ropes and I was the first to slide down the shaft, which turned a corner on its descent so that we couldn't see the bottom.

When I had negotiated the bend and was nearing the bottom I saw in the torchlight at the bottom of the shaft, a dead body - the body of a sheep!

If you know anything about New Zealand you'll know that it is famous for having 20 sheep for every person in the country. You may also know that sheep are particularly stupid animals. This sheep had wandered into the mine, presumably to get out of the rain and had plunged to its death; principally

because it made three cardinal mistakes. The first is that it didn't walk in the light. It couldn't see where it was going. The second is that it didn't keep fellowship, it got separated from the rest of the flock. The third mistake was that it didn't know the pitfalls.

In the same way Christian foundation year doctors generally fall for one or more of these three reasons: they stop walking in the light - in other words living in obedience to God's word (*Ps 119: 105 - 'Thy word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path'*) or they don't keep fellowship - they get separated from or fail to establish contacts with Christian friends; or they fail to notice the pitfalls - they simply don't see trouble coming and therefore don't prepare properly for it.

Following is some practical advice about how to survive; or rather how to thrive as a Christian in the foundation years and lay a good foundation for your Christian service in the years ahead.

1 Maintain your relationship with God

In Jesus' Sermon on the Mount the wise man who built his house upon the rock was the man who heard Jesus' words and put them into practice (*Mt 7:24*). What are Jesus' words? In Matthew 7 Jesus is referring to the words he has just been speaking in the previous two chapters: the beatitudes and the teaching on our personal devotional life; not just our actions but our inmost thoughts as well.

There is teaching on being salt and light in the world, on not harbouring resentment against people and on settling differences quickly; on not lusting, keeping our word, not taking revenge on those who hurt us. There are instructions about loving our enemies, and on practising our generosity, prayer and fasting in private for God's benefit and not as a performance for others. There is advice about not being trapped by wealth and not worrying; on not judging others and bringing everything to God in prayer.

Matthew 5&6 are the immediate context of Jesus' words and this is the narrow way that he wants us to walk. But Jesus is referring more widely to the whole of Scripture, the whole Bible. Like him we need to immerse ourselves in it, so that it becomes an established part of our thought patterns.

There is actually space to read the Bible and pray in the midst of a busy junior doctor's life; provided we learn to cope with irregularities and do it on the hoof.

My prime advice would be to make your time with God leisure and not work; a time to be, rather than a time to do. 'Don't just do something, stand there'... or preferably 'sit or lie there'. As Christian doctors we are activists and we can fall into the trap of feeling that we always have to be achieving something. Time with God can become just another chore to get through... to read our four chapters or whatever. Instead let it be a time just to be with God and hear his voice in the midst of all the hurry.

If you have not been on call the night before, then the best time is before breakfast. But if your routines are disrupted, as they often will be, then take time with God when you can; at night before bed, over a meal, on the loo is one good place where you can't be interrupted (but don't read too long or you'll exacerbate your haemorrhoids), when waiting for blood results or x-ray results etc.

One of the best investments I made was to buy a complete Bible small enough to fit in my white coat pocket so I could take snatches during the day. If you have internet access on your phone, websites such as <http://www.biblegateway.com/>, or <http://www.youversion.com/> (which also has various bible reading plans to follow) enable you to read wherever you are, and on some phones you can download the Bible as an app. Memory verses on cards are also good to meditate on. We have to get over any embarrassment we may feel about reading the Bible in public; and it's important to do that early.

You can also take a small notebook with you, or use your phone to write down any good verses or thoughts - a kind of mini-journal to come back to. We so often forget the way God has blessed us in the past.

Likewise we can 'pray on the hoof'. Get into the habit of arrow prayers so that your daily work becomes a conversational walk with God. Talk to him in your mind (or audibly if alone!) about everything and do everything with him. Ask for his

help in everything you do.

I found that Christian tapes (or CDs/MP3s now) were a real boost to listen to in my room; or to play praise songs on the guitar. Singing songs in your mind on the wards can be a great antidote for wrong thoughts and complaining. Daily devotional books which fit in your pocket - like ICMDA's own 'Doctors' Life Support' are literally a godsend (also available on <http://www.cmf.org.uk/doctors/devotion.asp>).

Schedule time to do more in depth Bible study or reading. As a house officer I studied part-time for a divinity paper on comparative religion through a Bible College. This was excellent for giving me some more depth input when I couldn't get along to church or home group. Christian ministry recordings from conferences or your favourite preacher are good too to fill up those lonely hours.

Most of all we need a hefty dose of God's grace. In the foundation years we will make a lot of mistakes; both in our work and in our personal relations with patients and other staff. We may often feel that we are being a bad witness especially when we see non-Christians who are doing a better job of caring than we are. It's essential to know that God is a loving father and to get into the habit of confessing our sins to him and knowing his forgiveness. As Christians we should not feel condemned or paralysed by guilt.

2 Maintain relationships with other Christians

Coals in the fire glow hot but when placed individually on the hearth they quickly grow cold. So it is with our own Christian lives. If we do not meet together to stir each other up to love and good works (*Heb 10:24,25*) we will grow cold in our faith too. We need one another.

Consider seriously staying where you are by getting a job near the medical school at which you trained. After all, enough in your life is changing and it is important to maintain some stability. If you do have to move then try to ensure that you do so with Christian friends you already know. It may be possible if your attachment is a short one and you are not too far away from your base to go back to your own local home church on Sundays - but otherwise find a church that teaches God's Word faithfully and offers pastoral support and stay there. Don't be a rootless spiritual tourist!

Speak to the pastor early about your work situation. Many don't understand about junior doctors' hours and may put your sporadic attendance down to lack of commitment. Get involved in some sort of ministry if you can - it may not be possible to do much, but anything will help you stay sane and give you an opportunity to give out as well. In some posts, with particularly unsociable or variable hours, going to work may be all you can do, so don't feel guilty when this is the case.

I got involved in running a Friday night youth group - there was not too much preparation required and there were plenty of opportunities to talk with young people and also have some physical exercise. Look for a small group event, a home-group or Bible study, where you can develop closer friendships. I met regularly with a group of singles and marrieds around my age for Bible Study - it was excellent for fellowship and a clean break from the hospital - none of them were healthcare professionals! Look for other Christian staff with whom you can meet for prayer (triplets are best!) and try and find out who the other doctors in the area are.

CMF has a pastoral care scheme which links junior doctors with more senior members in the area. The Pastoral Carers are asked to offer whatever they can by way of contact, friendship, hospitality, advice on local churches and CMF activities, prayer and support during the junior's time in the area. Contact the CMF office if you are interested in being linked to a Pastoral Carer.

Correspond with friends and family and try to arrange holidays and trips away together so that you can maintain old ties. Such arrangements require joint planning some months ahead but they are well worth it. It's essential to keep close to people who have known you over many years - as they have a better sense of where you have come from and therefore where you are going.

3 Take opportunities to share your faith

Beware those little subtle denials of faith which we can so easily fall into in order to make a good impression with new colleagues. If you are asked what you did in the weekend - mention church as well as your other activities. People may look at you strangely and you may have to endure a few days of careful scrutiny, but it is far easier than trying to slip in your faith afterwards when you have initially denied it. Some of our best opportunities for evangelism will come with other staff, after they have seen the way we work, and have got to know us. Francis of Assisi is often quoted as saying: 'I share my faith with everyone I meet, and occasionally I use words'. There is nothing that neutralises our witness more quickly than an ungodly life; but junior doctors often simply use this as an excuse for keeping silent about Jesus Christ. Jesus did good works but he also preached the gospel. It's a real tragedy if we end up like a Christian missionary doctor in Thailand who was remembered as 'a good Buddhist' when he left after 15 years of service. Works without words is uninterpreted parable.

The General Medical Council in *Personal Beliefs and Medical Practice* (March 2008) states 'For some patients, acknowledging their beliefs or religious practices may be an important aspect of a holistic approach to their care. Discussing personal beliefs may, when approached sensitively, help you to work in partnership with patients to address their particular treatment needs.'

Jesus approached people as individuals at their point of need and by the skilful use of questions was able to draw them out. Get into the habit of slipping a question such as 'Do you have a faith that helps you at times such as this?' into the social history. It probably won't be appropriate to probe more deeply there and then but the patient's answer may well reveal something that you can pick up on later. Neutral questions such as, 'Do you have spiritual resources you can call on?', or even 'are you interested in spiritual things?' are open-ended enough so that if the patient wants to talk further you can introduce the subject without being pushy or offensive. If there is no apparent opportunity then just proceed with the rest of the functional enquiry.

Sometimes more direct questions can open up great opportunities to share about Christ. I once felt prompted to ask a patient who had unsuccessfully attempted suicide, 'Do you believe in God?'. When he replied 'It's funny you should ask that because that's the whole problem' I knew I was on to a winner. As it transpired he had earlier said to God; 'I'm going to kill myself, just you try and stop me' before locking himself in a car with the exhaust running. God answered his prayer when the car stalled after he fell unconscious and he was rescued! The **Holy Spirit** gave me half an hour of quiet to talk further and encourage this struggling believer - the opportunity would not have come, had I not asked the initial question.

It's said that it takes an average of fifteen

contacts with Christians before a person is converted. We need to learn to be content in being one part of the chain. A junior doctor's life is filled with opportunities to pause briefly; to touch an arm, ask a question or give a smile that later identifies us as someone who will listen and be interested. With colleagues also, the breaks for meals or tea, or the delays in waiting for x-rays or lab results provide opportunities for chats which may lead on as we pray for God to open doors. An evening round, when we have more time to chat is an important habit to cultivate. We cannot talk with everyone, but each day there will be one or two we can spend a bit more time with. Pray 'Lord, show me who I can pause with today?'

Paul reminds us: 'be wise in the way that you act towards outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation always be seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.' (Co I 4:5,6)

4 Live with integrity

Nothing undermines verbal witness more effectively than professional incompetence or lack of integrity. Make sure that you are good at your job - it is very hard to lose a bad reputation.

The prophet Daniel was an extremely effective witness for God; and the author of the book tells us why: 'They tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct... but they were unable to do so. They could find no corruption in him

because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent'. (Dan 6:4)

He was trustworthy - that is he did what he was asked to do - the best house officer I ever had was a Catholic believer in whom I could have total confidence because he was a man of his word. Daniel was also not corrupt - that is his motives were pure. This did not mean that he didn't make mistakes, but rather that he didn't try to cover them up. Nor was he negligent - he did what he should have done. Aim to make your seniors' lives easier - as Paul says, serve them as though they were the Lord himself (Co I 3: 17).

Walking in the light with Christ does not mean that we are perfect; rather it means that we are open with people and are prepared to admit when we are wrong; even (and perhaps especially) to those who are lower than us in the hospital hierarchy. Be the junior who has the reputation of answering his bleep quickly and courteously even when tired; and say sorry when you make mistakes or let people down.

5 Watch your lifestyle

Because of frequent job location changes the foundation years give you the opportunity to remake your life every three to six months as you start work with a new group of colleagues, none of whom have met you before.

There is a great temptation to conform so that people like us and we need to

remember that 'bad company corrupts good character' (*1 Cor 15:33*)

Doctors work hard and then relax hard - and alcohol and sexual immorality are a constant temptation; especially when 'everyone else is doing it' and we are feeling tired and lonely.

Gossip is endemic among juniors; whenever a group gathers those who are absent can become the focus of innuendo and complaints. God has promised to judge us for every word spoken; and there is no quicker way to lose the confidence of people (and many opportunities to share Christ) than to be known as a gossip.

Cynicism is another temptation; especially if the system is corrupt and juniors are exploited and abused. Your portfolio (and all the other paperwork you have to do) may seem pointless (and may well be); it's part of submitting to the authorities that God has placed over us (*Rom 13.1*)

The best antidote to cynicism is Christian hope - nothing we do in the Lord's service is ever in vain (*1 Cor 15:58*) even if from a worldly perspective we seem just to have failed. God does not call us necessarily to be successful, but rather to be faithful.

6 Make sure you get adequate food and rest

When CMF student members in the UK graduate we send them a congratulatory letter; and often on the bottom will scribble a Bible verse. One of my favourites is Luke

5: 15, 16 - which I call Jesus' prescription for the tired junior doctor. It reads, 'crowds of people came to be healed of their sicknesses, but Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed'. If Jesus needed to withdraw from the demands of sick people in order to recharge his batteries, then how much more do we?

God's treatment of Elijah after his encounter with the prophets of Baal is very revealing. When after a time of exhausting service to his Lord, he lost his perspective and became depressed, God ministered to his practical need for food, drink and sleep - before recommissioning him (*1 Kings 19*).

When on call don't miss or delay your meals except in emergency - seemingly urgent work can usually wait and it is far more beneficial to your patients to have a doctor whose body is refreshed and whose judgement is not clouded by hunger or exhaustion.

Rest does not necessarily mean Egyptian PT (lying horizontally) and certainly not collapsing in front of the television which may simply exhaust you further. It may be restorative activity rather than inactivity that you require. Individuals are different so you need to know your own needs - is it being alone or with others that best restores you? Is it reading or physical activity?

I found it most restorative to read, to go for a walk or a run (especially in the parks near the hospital where we worked) or to play my flute or have a game of squash. I could do most of these activities either alone or with

others. The sport and music in particular - were a great way to unwind with non-Christian colleagues in a way that didn't compromise my moral standards and gave opportunity for witness.

It's best to find a leisure activity we enjoy which doesn't depend on set times or venues - and these activities suited me well. You may well be different.

7 Learn to handle loneliness

During the foundation years you will undoubtedly encounter loneliness. Make sure you learn how to handle it constructively. I have three suggestions:

First, use loneliness to build your relationship with the Lord - find your comfort and solace in him. Great men and women of God know how to draw strength by being alone with him. 'Praying the psalms' is a good habit to get into - that is, reading the psalms as they were your own words and prayers. David experienced most of the emotions foundation doctors are prone to but always took them back to God. We can be sure, that even if we feel that everyone has deserted us that God 'will never leave us nor forsake us' (*Heb 13:5*).

Second, use loneliness to help you understand lonely people. God often allows us to go through hard times partly in order that we may comfort others who face similar trials (*2 Cor 1 :3,4,9*). Understanding what it feels like to be alone will make us much better doctors.

Third, use loneliness to look for other lonely people - especially those from ethnic minority groups. A lonely person longs others to take an interest; but according to the golden rule (*Mt 7: 12*) we should respond to our own loneliness by seeking to do for others what we would have them do for us. In giving companionship we will find that we ourselves receive.

Write letters (or emails) when lonely. I wrote more letters during my house officer year than at any time of my life; and was able to give and receive encouragement in so doing. It was the thing that cemented together the relationships of our Christian group from medical school, although we were in hospitals hundreds of miles apart.

8 Build relationships

I love Jesus' parable of the man who made friends by writing off his master's debts. I admire his initiative (although not of course his morality). It's wise to make as many friends as you can, especially among those lower in the hospital pecking order.

Use what time and skills you have to do good to as many people as possible. Help the nurses by cleaning up your IV trolley after you - or by answering the phone when they are busy and you aren't. Learn the names of the hospital porters and greet them when you see them in the corridor. Be kind to the students and talk to them and teach them things when you have a spare moment. Ask the patients about their families and occupations: spend a tea break with other staff rather than alone in the mess.

9 Learn to manage your time

Essentially Jesus is the best model of how to use time well. Remember his principles of time management:

Guard your devotional life (*Mk 1:35; Lk 5: 15-16*)

Don't let the expectations of others control you (*Luke 4:42-44; Mk 3:31-35; Lk 2:48-50*)

Have a clear strategy (*Lk 4:18-19; Jn 2:4; Mk 1:38-39; Mk 10:33-34*)

Establish priorities (*Mk 1 :36-38*)

Make time for individuals (*Jn 3:1-21; 4:1-36; 5:1-15*)

Equip others (*Mt 9:37-38*)

Recognise the need for rest (*Is 58: 13,14*)

And put these principles into practice by:

1. Defining your purpose - know why you are here and what your role is and fulfil it rather than anyone else's.

2. Set your goals - Make them 'SMART' - specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time-related.

3. Decide your priorities - generally God first, people second and work third. If it's important and urgent, do it now; if it's important but not urgent schedule it, if it's urgent but not important for you to do, delegate it. If it's neither urgent nor important, forget it. Don't procrastinate unless you enjoy managing crises of your own making. What is done now doesn't need to be done later. Laekin's question, 'What's the best use of my time right now?' is a good question to be continually asking.

4. Make plans - it gives you a means of measuring your success, saves time and makes complex tasks achievable by a series of steps.

5. Develop time-saving strategies; a good diary and filing system will save months of

frustrated hunting and appointment clashes. Handle paper only once - then act, file (only if you intend to retrieve) or bin. Use spare moments and cultivate the best time-saving strategy of all - learn to say 'no' to things that are not primarily your responsibility.

10 Learn to manage your money

The average medical student in the UK graduates with a debt over £22,000. The student has lots of time but no money.

The doctor, by contrast has money but no time. As foundation doctors you may have relatively less money than house officers used to, but it is still much more than when you were a student. In order to manage the transition you need to develop the right habits from the beginning.

I was grateful for the advice of my first registrar, a Christian brother, who told me that he aimed to 'live like a missionary' and never to buy anything he couldn't pay cash for. In the years while Kirsty and I were working long hours we lived very simply, saved like mad and received the help of frugal and generous parents who had done the same. As a result we were able to pay off our mortgage within two years of buying our first house and have never been in debt since. We were also able to support ourselves through a year in the developing world and two years at Bible College.

Jesus' rule of life was 'give and you will receive' (Lk 6:38). It really works! One of the worst traps we can fall into is

thinking that we can save money by holding back our tithes and offerings for God's work. One of the most unclaimed of God's promises in Scripture is Malachi 3:10! 'Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse...Test me in this... and see in will not pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it'.

11 Ask for help... Frequently

The most dangerous junior doctor is the one who is too proud to say he does not know. Be prepared always to ask. If you are afraid of asking for advice because of the castigation you may receive at the hand of impatient seniors reflect on how much worse the consequences will be for you and your patient if you fail to ask and something goes wrong. Asking may express vulnerability but it also engenders trust. If you are struggling with a decision, ask. It then becomes the problem and responsibility of those above you in the hierarchy.

12 Know where you stand on ethical issues and stand there

You may be surprised I have left ethical issues until last; but I've done it deliberately. Although they are important, it is not medical ethics that causes the downfall of most Christian junior staff, but rather neglect of the other principles I have already listed. However, there are ethical decisions to make and in the increasingly secular society in which we live, there is often a lot of pressure on us to conform. As a house officer I was once summoned

to the superintendent's office and asked to admit patients for termination of pregnancy; something I was not prepared to do. Because I knew where I stood I had the courage to stand there. He very quickly gave way.

While we must be subject to the governing authorities, we must resist if they try to force us to do something unethical. Daniel is an excellent example to us here. He knew where he stood, refused to conform and suggested alternatives that ultimately won the day. Daniel did not eat the 'king's diet' and neither must we (Dan 1:1-21)

Summary

The foundation years are full of challenges but also a real opportunity to start out in the way that we wish to continue in our service to the Lord. My advice is as above: maintain your devotional life, maintain Christian fellowship, take opportunities to share your faith, be of good report, watch your lifestyle, make sure you get adequate food and rest, learn to handle loneliness, build good relationships, learn to manage time and money, ask for help... frequently and know where you stand on ethical issues. 'Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.' (Co 1 3:23-24) Most of all, remember that even if we are faithless, God is faithful. He will never forsake us (Heb 13:5) and is able to keep us from falling (Jude 24).

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