

Birmingham (med) school days

James Tomlinson reflects on his years at medical school

choosing to study medicine

Around the age of 14 I remember replying to the question 'what do you want to do with your life?' by stating that I would never be a medic, a nurse or anyone who cared for others as I cared only for myself. When I said this I was not yet a Christian and viewed myself as an atheist. I thought Christians were misguided Bible bashers.

Before my 16th birthday I developed a friendship with a lad in my class who, whenever the subject of God came up, stated that he was a Christian and believed in God. We had some great arguments! Through his friendship and being invited to church my position shifted. On the basis of the reality of God which I had seen in my friend and others at church, and after reading a booklet which asked 'what is a Christian?' I prayed, accepting Jesus as my saviour and Lord.

In the weeks following as I continued to go to church and read my Bible, I experienced a gradual awareness that something had very much changed. I wanted to care for others; so much so that following a period of volunteer experience at a local hospital (which I was encouraged to do by the same friend who led me to Christ) I applied to study medicine with the conviction that God was calling me to do so.

the pre-clinical years

In September 1994, I arrived at Birmingham medical school and within days found myself at my first CMF meeting on a Wednesday

lunchtime. During my first two years in Birmingham, as well as going to church, the friends I made through the Christian Union, in my hall of residence and particularly through CMF were very valuable to me as I sought to live as a Christian medical student. Praying with each other, studying the Bible and enjoying fun together were all important. One of the most helpful aspects was meeting medical students in the years above who had already survived and understood the challenges of the early years.

Already appreciating the reality of God, as a student I came to appreciate that ours is an evidence-based faith rooted in the Jesus of history as documented in the biographies of Jesus (the Gospels) and validated through Jesus' death and resurrection.

Leading a small group for other students to explore the Christian faith as a second year, and having to answer others' questions and explain the Christian faith to them





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strengthened my own understanding and confidence in the gospel. Looking back I realise that there were many more opportunities to share faith then than I have now. I was told (but didn't believe until I graduated) that 'you have more available time now as a student than you will have later as a doctor'. We were encouraged to use our time well: to read the Bible, read Christian books, spend time with God and with other believers.

the clinical years

Although it was great being in hospital, at last seeing patients and starting to feel like a real medic, being away from the campus doing placements at hospitals around Birmingham meant that we were disconnected from students studying other subjects. Knowing Christian medics at the same hospital as me was important for support and fellowship.

Decreased free time when in hospital for a full

working day and needing to read and practice my clinical examination skills was difficult. Rather than cut back on commitments I crammed them into my decreased time. Then when I had my first clinical examination, disaster struck - I failed. And why had I failed? Well the examiners said that I was 'not confident enough'. However if I'm honest it was because I had not given the time to my studies and reading which I should have. And why was that? Because I resented study, seeing it as preventing and limiting the things I did as service for God.

'spiritual schizophrenia'

Around the same time, I heard a talk at the CMF Student Conference by Nick Land, a psychiatrist, which totally changed how I saw medicine. Through his talk, (now available as a great article on the CMF website¹), I understood that too often we divide our lives into the secular and sacred. What we 'do for God' and what we 'just do'. There is no such distinction in Scripture. As Nick put it, using the lay understanding, we have 'spiritual schizophrenia'. Colossians 3:23-24 reminds us: 'Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.'

A crucial shift in my thinking took place - my service for God was not just my involvement in Sunday School or my befriending of

international students - everything, including the study of medicine, was my service for God.

Addressing my diagnosis of spiritual schizophrenia has been one of the most important turning points in my development as a doctor and a follower of Jesus; it changed how I studied and I questioned how to practise medicine 'as working for the Lord'. Later in my early years as a junior doctor I became increasingly aware of the joy of working with God in partnership. Previously, working for God could become a heavy burden. Now I realise not only that I practise medicine for him but that he invites me to do it with him. 'Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.' (Galatians 5:25)

sharing faith

Through sharing leadership of CMF clinical group meetings, attending the national conference, and reading *Nucleus*, I caught the vision of supporting each other to follow Jesus in medicine, reaching out to and praying for our friends and colleagues at medical school.

A highlight of leading the CMF clinical group was organising the annual weekend away and getting 50 of us to Shropshire for a weekend. During the weekend as we looked at 2 Peter, God spoke to many of us about our vision for reaching our friends and medical school. During our last session together I remember asking what people felt we should do as we returned. Someone suggested cooking Christmas dinner, inviting friends to come as a sign of our friendship and love for them. 16 of those present immediately volunteered to be in a team to make it happen. Just over four weeks later we cooked a three course Christmas dinner for 250 people using a local church as our venue and volunteers from the main Christian

Union as waiters. It was an amazing evening, approximately 100 of us were Christian medical students and 150 were our non-Christian friends. We had leaflets on the tables about discussion groups which we then ran the following term where at least one person I know came to Christ. We trusted and relied on God for the money and resources to put on the meal. That night almost every Christian in the medical school came and invited someone.

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elective

Seeing my elective as an opportunity to use the time for God, I looked at going to India but also at going somewhere with Operation Mobilisation. When they suggested going to Kazakhstan (which I'd heard of because I met an international student from there the previous year) I jumped at the chance. So in March 1998 I found myself at the end of their winter in a landscape reminiscent of a James Bond film.

As I asked 'why am I here Lord?' and the team I was with also asked 'why are you here?', within days I had met a group of medical students who thought they were the first group to ever meet together and pray for their medical school.

Throughout the eight weeks of my elective they had me speaking at their meetings, meeting their friends and generally making as much use of me as possible. A verse which came alive to me during this time is Ephesians 2:10 'For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in

advance for us to do.' I had not expected or planned what happened, but through my background and my involvement with CMF, God had already prepared me for opportunities such as speaking on science and faith to professors at the science institute, and advising and supporting the fledgling group of medical students.

My elective was the most fantastic adventure, where I found myself stretched but also immensely blessed. The second time I met one of my friends, Sasha, I felt God saying that what I was seeing in the small group of medical students I had met was the beginning of what he would do through medics in Central Asia and that he was connecting me to this. Looking back now over many years of friendship and visiting I have had the amazing privilege of continuing to support medics, students and graduates as they work out what it means for them to be followers of Jesus in medicine.

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When I returned from my elective, I brought home a dream: to invite the Kazakhstan group leaders to the UK CMF Student Conference, then for an elective in Birmingham, and to take a team from Birmingham to run an evangelistic summer camp. A fairly crazy dream you might say, but as I shared it with others in the CMF people started praying, emailing the leaders of the group and raising the £2,000 needed to bring them to the UK. The result was that in January 1999 the two leaders came to Birmingham for just over two months. During

that time the whole of the local CMF group was involved in hosting and cooking for them.

For us the impact of meeting Christian medical students from such a different culture was massive, as was the exercise of trusting God and working together for a common vision. For me one of the most precious aspects of the University of Birmingham CMF is that we were a group of people who went on adventures together with God. When the first summer team went to Kazakhstan, six students and two doctors from Birmingham went and ran a summer camp with 100 non-Christian medical students. But as well as those of us who went, many more gave money and prayed. I remember three third years who, stuck in Birmingham studying that summer, met every day to pray for the team. Even before we went they were listening to God and praying with us as a team.

conclusion

As I look back on coming to Birmingham to study medicine, I am struck by God's faithfulness and goodness as well as by his grace and patience. Some of my closest and most precious friends are those I met though CMF between 1994 and 1999 at medical school. They are the people who have prayed for me, challenged me, cared for me and come on adventures with God with me. Will you finish medical school able to say something similar?

REFERENCES

1. Land N. Spiritual schizophrenia. *Nucleus* 1997; winter:7-14 cmf.li/1s76X07