

childhood dreams

graduate medical student **Alexandra Roche** shares experiences and encouragements

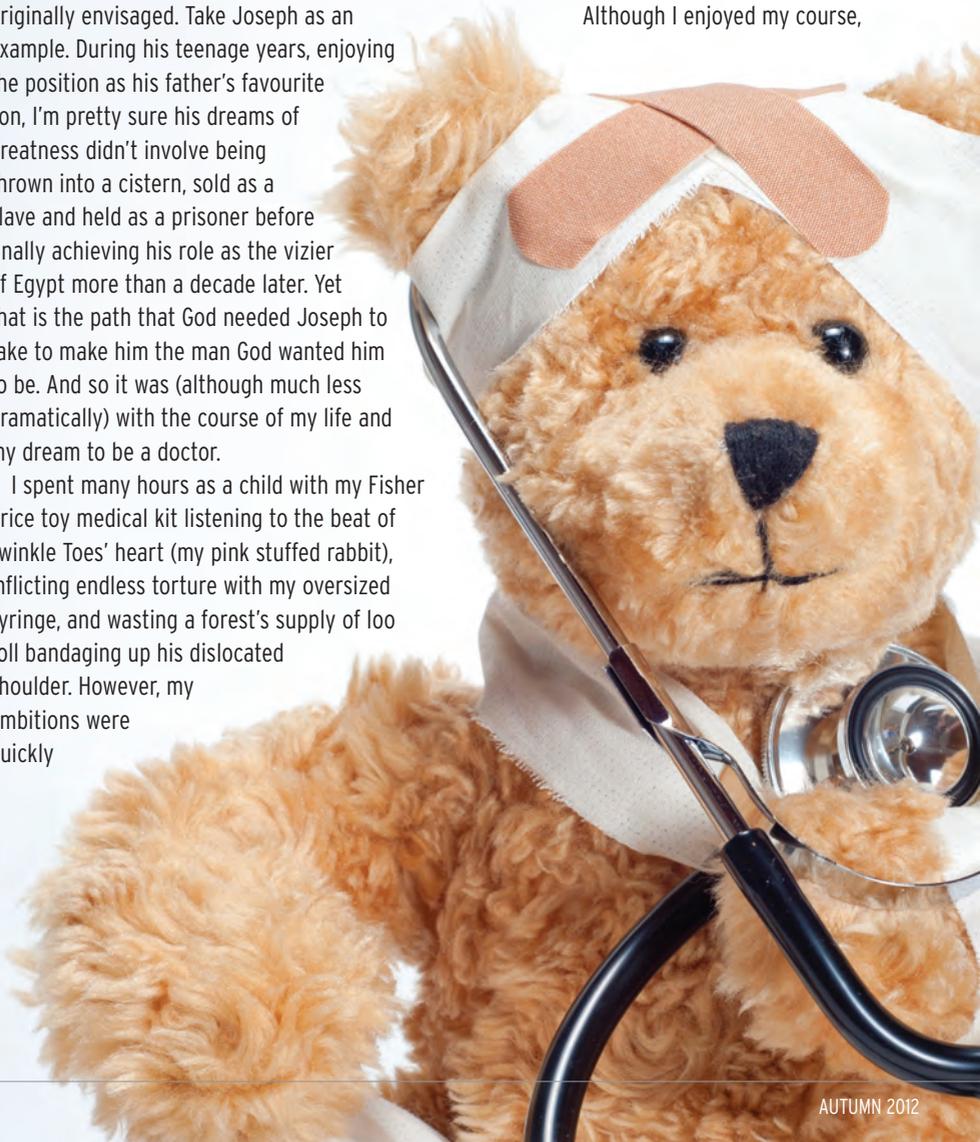
Many things in life do not turn out the way that we imagine they will. After all, God's ways are not our ways.¹ Reading the stories of any number of biblical characters I find it difficult to believe that the course of their lives turned out as they might have originally envisaged. Take Joseph as an example. During his teenage years, enjoying the position as his father's favourite son, I'm pretty sure his dreams of greatness didn't involve being thrown into a cistern, sold as a slave and held as a prisoner before finally achieving his role as the vizier of Egypt more than a decade later. Yet that is the path that God needed Joseph to take to make him the man God wanted him to be. And so it was (although much less dramatically) with the course of my life and my dream to be a doctor.

I spent many hours as a child with my Fisher Price toy medical kit listening to the beat of Twinkle Toes' heart (my pink stuffed rabbit), inflicting endless torture with my oversized syringe, and wasting a forest's supply of loo roll bandaging up his dislocated shoulder. However, my ambitions were quickly

shattered as I was not met with support from my A-level teachers when I expressed my wish to study medicine. They refused to predict me the grades required for medical school and as a result I did not even apply.

Heartbroken, I studied pharmacology instead.

Although I enjoyed my course,





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I could do little but look on in envy at the medical students. After graduating, despite being armed with a 2:1 grade, I was still unable to apply for medical school. At that time, graduate courses were few and far between, funding for a second undergraduate course was impossible, and my parents could not support me financially.

Disappointed and unsure of what to do next, I joined up with a temp agency in the city. I ended up working for an investment bank doing some administration work. Although I knew nothing about stock markets, a few weeks in, my apparent curiosity and analytical skills won me a job as a stock broker. I stayed for eight years. On the surface at least, it was a glamorous role with many perks and was exceedingly well paid. I got to live in Hamburg, learned German, supported my family, funded my shopping addiction, had many wonderful holidays and owned a sports car.

However, despite the many material blessings that came with my job, I was never content. The work did not fulfil me and I was working 80 hours a week at the expense of my health.

To compensate I strived to accumulate more and more material gains with limited satisfaction. When the markets crashed in 2009 and bonuses were no longer, it forced me to reflect on what was keeping me in that career.

My heart kept coming back to my dream of becoming a doctor.

By now graduate-entry programmes were more popular, funding was available from the NHS and graduate students were eligible for a student loan. I also had some of my own savings that could help with my living expenses. Thus, after a lot of prayer, I applied and here I am today, about to enter my third year at medical school.

At medical school I've noticed a visible divide between the undergraduates and graduate students, especially those on the four-year graduate-entry programme (GEPs). Each group keeps largely to themselves and, to be brutally honest, neither seems to have a particularly high opinion of the other. I believe that it is a great shame the two groups do not mix more freely outside of the classroom, as they have a lot to offer each other, especially amongst the Christian medics.

Being a GEP student has its advantages. I am certain that this is the career path I want to take. I have more confidence in my own abilities and a better understanding of my strengths and weaknesses. Communication is easier and I am not so daunted talking to patients, lecturers, tutors and doctors. In addition to developing my communication skills in my previous career, being closer to the doctors and teachers in age makes me less 'star-struck' than I might once have been. As a result, I believe that my relationships with them are better. My life experience has also helped to keep things in perspective, maintain a healthy work-life balance and be more organised.

I believe that undergraduate students could make more use of the GEPs. We can help to support Christian students in their faith, lend a friendly and more experienced ear to any personal issues or give tips on study techniques.

We can also do more to establish better links with the doctors that teach us, such as asking questions or setting up tutorials, extra clinics or ward rounds.

However, GEPs do struggle with many issues and insecurities of their own. If I thought the life-changes I had to go through from a school-girl to university student were big, it was much harder the second time around. The main difference being that the first time I went to university, the experience was shared with all my school friends. The second time I was doing it alone. It was a daunting and confusing time that forced me to reflect harshly upon the drivers and motivators of my life.

I believe that this is a crucial time for CMF and the CUs to be more involved with the Christian graduate students, offering spiritual and moral support and giving them the valuable reminder that God is in control. I also think this is the time that CMF and CUs could do more to reach out to non-Christian GEPs to help them to think through some of these difficult issues. Given the massive life-changes that they have already had to go through, I believe that some of my fellow GEPs may be a little more open-minded to listen to the gospel message than they might have been as an undergraduate.

It has been difficult for me to maintain relationships with old friends, who are mainly well established in their careers, and find it hard to accept that I can't meet up as freely as I used to because I have to study and cannot afford it. Many of my fellow students who are married, and those with children, have an even harder struggle to maintain a good work-life-family balance. Church also suffers. Tragically I find getting to mid-week meetings, or going to more than one service on a Sunday, gets

pushed towards the bottom of my priority list below studying and socialising.

Friendships developed with Christian medics in the CU and CMF (both GEPs and undergraduates) have therefore become crucial to me. These are often people that I see on a daily basis, either because they are on my course or I might just bump into them in the canteen. They have more understanding of what I am going through and can support me spiritually in this way. Discussions with them have also been really helpful when it comes to contemplating the difficult ethical issues that we often encounter as medics. In addition, some of the undergraduates are ahead of me in terms of our studies, and have been wonderful in giving me lots of tips and advice about the course, or helping me practise my clinical skills, and there is much we can learn together.

Sometimes I have to say it out loud to believe that I'm going to be a doctor. It feels like it has been a long and difficult road to get here - certainly not the way that I would have planned it. However, looking back I can see how God has led me through my various experiences so that I can be the graduate medical student I am today. I am thankful to those in CMF, CU and my other Christian friends and church family who have constantly reminded me of who has led me thus far and who will continue leading me through my career in the future. My hope is that CMF and the CUs can do more to keep encouraging and supporting each other, especially graduate students who are still in the minority in most medical schools. Ultimately, in sharing a common faith and a common vocation, differences such as age and life-experience are often forgotten. ■

REFERENCES

1. Isaiah 55:8