Case Study: General Practitioner - Debbie

What do you do?
I've been qualified as a doctor for just over ten years, and I've been in general practice as a qualified GP for two and a half years.

I'm on a salary here; there are three other GPs who are partners, so in a way, this is their business. We're doing the same job, we care for patients in the same way, but they also have the business side to deal with as well.

What is your background?
At the time I left comprehensive school in the mid '80s, Youth Training Schemes were the 'big thing'. So, I initially went on a YTS at 16. I completed the YTS, but then went back into education to do A levels.

When I was younger, I had wanted to be a vet, but not coming from an academic background, I didn't think I was capable.

But it was good for me to leave school, have a year out, then go to college to do my A levels, because I met other people who had different ambitions. So I began to think, "I can do this". I was boosted along by the college, as well.

Subsequently, I ended up applying to do medicine, and managed to get a place at medical school. I don't even think that I wanted to be a doctor then; maybe I didn't feel that I was capable of being a doctor. I wanted to learn about the body, and I thought that it was the only subject where I would learn everything.

What characteristics do you need to be successful in your job?
To be any kind of doctor, and particularly in general practice, the key skill, in my eyes, is communication. Obviously, there is the academic side, but it just takes hard work and memory to do that. But I think that mostly it's about communication, empathy, listening skills and having good instincts.

Also, you need determination and dedication to do the job. It's a vocation: you are a doctor not only during office hours, you're a doctor the whole time. It's an honour, I think, and a privilege, to be in such a position. So, I think you always have to respect that, and not abuse your position.

What other jobs could you do using the skills from this job?
Within medicine, I could specialise in a particular area. Studying medicine is a good way of starting off, then there are loads of fields you can go into.

A few years ago, I went to work in South Africa as a generalist. Then I came back to do general practice training, knowing that with a GP qualification, you can work in many different countries.

I could go and work in a hospital and do sessions as a specialist at staff grade or as an assistant.

Also, I know some GPs who have gone into law, into criminal work and sports medicine.

What changes will there be in the future?
Salaried doctors are quite a new thing. In the last few years, numbers have been growing. And, you find more and more doctors, like myself, who don't want to be tied down to a practice, where you have to buy into the surgery building, etc.

It's been decided that it is safer now for more doctors to work in this way. Most of the work we are doing now is monitored by the health care trust: our prescribing is watched, how many patients we see in a day, how long we see patients for.

It's all about quality of care, and making sure that all patients get the right treatment. And also, checking that we have
enough resources to provide the service. So, that's how general practice is changing.

Also, the hours are getting longer, because expectations are higher. Our access has to be improved, so we have to open earlier and work later. And we have more targets to fulfil. It's hard work! But I wouldn't discourage anybody.

What are the biggest challenges in your job?

The challenge to me is, 'what is wrong with the person in front of me?'. Someone comes to you with symptoms, and you have to find out what's wrong. It's challenging that you haven't got very much time.

But that's the bit that's exciting: trying to make someone better, or trying to work out why they are feeling the way they are. It can also be very rewarding.

Time is very challenging, on a day-to-day basis; trying to fit everything in and trying to manage your time. It's something you learn, I think.

Also, I've worked in hospitals in some African countries where not many patients speak English, and that's challenging.

Are there many opportunities to enter this career?

Once you're qualified as a GP, it's easy to find work, if you're flexible. I could get a job tomorrow, working on a temporary basis.

Once you've passed your professional exams, you know you're never going to lose your qualification. The only way you're going to lose it is if you do something that causes you to get struck off.

What do you like about your job?

I like the security; that's been a really important thing to me. I know I'll always be able to find a job, wherever.

Also, the opportunities it's given me. I'm going back to South Africa next year, to work. Being a doctor has given me that opportunity, as it did before.

Just the job itself, really; as I said, it's a privileged post and I enjoy the relationship I build up with patients. And, the fact that patients can come to me and tell me anything about their lives, how they feel.

What do you dislike about your job?

The main thing I dislike is the amount of stress it creates. There's no doubt, being truthful, that there are days when it is quite stressful.

And, although I still maintain that I enjoy what I'm doing, I can get very stressed. It's not so much the job itself, it's the time pressure I think, and the hours I have to work. Getting tired makes me quite stressed.

Now, it's not so bad: in general practice. I'm not awake all night. But I used to hate nights on-call, not getting any sleep. The constant demand that you're in all the time. You're never really able to get a break. That is a problem.

Even now, I come to work, and as soon as I walk in the door, maybe at quarter to eight, until I go home at sometimes half past seven, you're constantly in demand, whether it be from patients, or staff or other GPs, or phones. You can never really switch off. But, I think that you have to accept that, because that's the position you have.

What are your ambitions?

I worked in South Africa in the mid- to late '90s, at a time when HIV was around, and we were starting to see AIDS patients, but not on such a scale as it is now.

I've just been offered a job, back at the rural hospital I worked at before. So, my immediate plan is to go back to South Africa and specialise in HIV medicine. I've also applied to do a diploma in HIV and AIDS management while I am there.

It may not be something I want to do forever, because although I expect the work to be rewarding, I think it's going to be very challenging and quite emotionally exhausting as well.
What advice would you give to someone interested in your career?

I would encourage anybody to go into medicine; I think it's wonderful. I've had quite a varied career now, and I can't think of any part of it that I've really disliked. I've enjoyed most jobs.

Anybody in any job gets a bit fed up, but on the whole, I've enjoyed most of my career so far. And, I feel that there are doors opening all of the time.

A day in the life

8:30 am - 12:00 or 1:00 pm

During morning surgery, I usually see between 15 and 18 patients.

1:00 pm - 3:00 pm

Home visits. The number of visits depends on the difficulty of the case and the distance I have to travel.

3:00 pm - 6:00 or 7:00 pm

Afternoon surgery.

Also, during each day, I need to fit in paperwork, such as forms and referrals. I also deal with queries and requests for advice.

Each day, one of the practice GPs is on-call from 8:00 am to 6:00 pm. If this is me, I may have extra visits before/between/after surgery times and extra stuff to sort out as the GP 'on-call'.