

A life in clinical anatomy, academia, and education: advice for medical students from Professor Peter Abrahams

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Historically, a career in medicine represents a great breadth of potential specialisms and opportunities^[1]. This can often leave medical students feeling overwhelmed and unsure about which route to take—the paradox of choice^[2].

For wisdom traversing these challenging decisions as students, we interviewed Professor Peter Abrahams, clinical anatomist, medical educator, and academic^[3]. Professor Abrahams' work has influenced clinical anatomy and medical education internationally. His major educational contributions include the Abrahams and McMinn's "Clinical Atlas of Human Anatomy," now in its eighth edition.

Here we share 2 lessons learned from Professor Abrahams' experience, to help students navigate and optimize medical school life.

Only do things you are passionate about

At medical school, students are often encouraged to engage in activities to put themselves ahead of their peers: "box-ticking"^[4]. However, this can distract students from what truly drives them.

Professor Abrahams' advice for students is to follow their passion. Early in his lectureship, he was told by colleagues that he must complete a PhD to become a Professor. He duly started his PhD studying the Schwann cell, but was concurrently asked by prominent anatomy author, Professor Robert McMinn, to assume the writing of his anatomy textbook. Professor Abrahams recalls, "the research I was doing on the Schwann cell was fun, but I wasn't passionate about it. I was passionate about making textbooks that students could learn from." Diverging from the traditional path for academic career progression led Professor

Abrahams into clinical anatomy and education, a field about which he was passionate and could thus excel in.

Now a Professor, he advises students contemplating research to "find something that really interests you. If you're excited about it and it seems interesting, do it. But don't do it for the sake of it" (sic).

Lesson: Ensure that you are passionate about what you do or it will become tiresome.

Be adaptable

Professor Abrahams applied for medical school contrary to his original career plan. Despite his intention to become a geography teacher, his experiences teaching at a school in Borneo highlighted a different avenue. Noticing he had some first aid experience, the school's headmaster asked Professor Abrahams to run an afterschool clinic for ill students. Finding the experience enriching, he instead applied to medical school upon returning home. Reflecting on this, Professor Abrahams advises, "don't ever plan anything, because it never goes to plan. Some people say, 'I'm going to be a surgeon' or, 'I'm going to be a cardiologist' when they're 18 years old, but it isn't like that in life generally." If he had not been open-minded about his career direction, this experience would not have led Professor Abrahams to his subsequent medical career.

Despite planning to become a surgeon, during an anatomy demonstrating rotation Professor Abrahams wrote a book on the anatomy of procedures done by junior doctors, *Clinical Anatomy of Practical Procedures*. This led to an extensive career as an author, with many textbooks published in multiple editions. Professor Abrahams has since been offered various senior university lectureships and recalls his mind-set at these times: "I'll do it for a year or two and see how it goes, then I'll go back into surgery." He has since, however, continued in lectureship positions, never returning to surgery.

Professor Abrahams concluded with general guidance for medical students. "I think a lot of people are high achievers in medicine and they get too focussed on a single target. Life can be much more exciting. I think you have to have a focus: if you want to be a surgeon, you have to focus on your exams, as you know those are a prerequisite [for that career]. But I wouldn't ever get too focussed on, 'that's what I have to do!' If I can inspire students not to get too rigid in their plans, I think that's good. Because the health service is changing all the time and you just don't know what will be here or won't be here in the future."

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Lesson: Many of life's events are serendipitous and the medical world is always evolving, so don't become too rigid in your plans—enjoy the journey.

Medical school represents a sea of opportunities for those determined to grow and learn. The approach students take to such opportunities can help them acquire life-long knowledge, whether that be in leadership, academia, or teaching. We have presented 2 key pieces of advice we learned from Professor Abrahams and hope our peers find them as informative as we did.

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