

# Introduction

Life after Medicine? An oxymoron? I don't think so. I was 54 years old and had had enough of working as a doctor when I decided it was time to leave. Medicine had lost its appeal for me. I'd had enough of busy clinics, demanding and aggressive patients, increasing paperwork, decreasing funding and low morale. There were too many rules and regulations, too many forms to fill in and too much talk of data collection and being 'on target.' Although the feeling had been building up for some time, my epiphany came when I knew it was time to stop moaning and take positive action, which for me meant leaving the medical profession.

Deciding to leave Medicine was the moment when I was able to see clearly and intuitively, understand and find the solution to my personal dilemma. It was a split-second insight when I knew I wanted to change my life by stopping medical work, which I'd been doing for 30 years. I had to find out what else life had to offer. I wanted to do something different, and although I was strongly motivated to leave the profession, I was anxious about all that this would entail, including a loss or change of my personal and public identity. I would no longer be a doctor. Nevertheless, it was the right time for me to take that leap out of my comfort zone into the unknown and find out whether there could be a life after Medicine.

However, although I was anticipating an uncomfortable transition into my new life, I found the journey to be even more challenging than I had expected. Friends, family and colleagues tried their best to dissuade me from

embarking on what they and I too perceived as being the enormous step of leaving the profession of which I had been a part for so long. Their negative reactions surprised me and tested my determination, so there were times when it was difficult to remain focused and discover what I wanted to do instead of Medicine.

As a result of the antagonism that I encountered, I experienced several periods of self-doubt about whether they were right and I was wrong and making a big mistake. I now recognise this as part of my journey of change as I experienced a gamut of emotions, on a rollercoaster ride from anticipation and anger to frustration and excitement. In addition, I was genuinely apprehensive about what would happen, and even though I was also very aware of something inside me – a bubbling eagerness about entering a new life stage – I tried to close my ears to those who were trying to persuade me to continue working as a doctor and their suggestions about ‘keeping my hand in’ and ‘doing locums from time to time.’

I had made my decision, and even though I could not understand some colleagues’ reactions, I was acutely aware of and upset by their resentment of my departure.

A few people were more encouraging and curious, asking me about my reasons and wondering how and if I would manage to fill my days without the busyness of medical work.

If you, too, are considering leaving the medical profession or are about to retire at the end of a long medical career and are wondering what life will be like, the aim of this book is to enable you to sail through the transition to a new life after Medicine with ease. Your emotions about this shift in your life may be related to whether you are choosing to go voluntarily or whether your imminent departure has been necessary because of ill health, suspension or reaching retirement age. If you are leaving reluctantly, you may be concerned about how you will cope with life beyond the clinics and wards.

Whatever your reason for leaving Medicine, you may be astonished, as I was, to experience a surprisingly strong reaction to your choice, both within yourself and from others.

There is something about being a doctor that makes it difficult and challenging to walk away from the profession, however much you want to do so. There remains the huge issue of your identity as a doctor, not only as you see yourself but also others’ expectations of what you can do, especially in emergency situations.

The usual symptoms of dealing with change can be exacerbated by the

added nuances of leaving Medicine. Any change may be stressful, particularly if you have ingrained inner beliefs about the consequences of not finishing something, or of giving up sooner than planned. These ideas are connected with how you and those close to you deal with change and regard the medical profession and people who become doctors. Since many people assume that becoming a doctor is a vocation, they find it difficult to cope with the idea of you choosing to move away from your 'calling.'

Your attitudes to life originated to a large extent from your parents, who guided you in the way that they truly thought was best for you. Of course their strategies and rules were based on their own life experiences and what had worked or not worked for them. When you consider how much society has changed since your parents and grandparents were growing up, it's little wonder that their values and hopes about work and life, which were right for them, may no longer be applicable to you now.

When you started at medical school you may have been so highly thought of by your parents and the rest of your family that now, as you consider a life beyond Medicine, you may feel that you are letting them down and being disloyal. However, even though they gave you the grounding that made you the person you are today, you are now entitled to make up your own mind and live in the way you want.

Your desire for change is the match that lights the fire of your transformation and enables a big shift to begin. You may have heard a chance remark, had a conversation with a stranger, watched a programme on television, or read an article, a book or something else that ignited within you a desire for change.

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Dr Green was fed up with the long hours, and at the end of several days on call always threatened to leave the profession. However, she wasn't able to take the step she needed to write the letter of resignation until she overheard someone visiting a patient, who looked around the ward and said 'Thank goodness I don't work here any more. Look how tired and drawn those doctors are. I'm so glad I gave up Medicine. I wonder why I didn't do it sooner – there is so much else to do.' At that moment Dr Green asked herself 'What's stopping me?' and she realised the answer was herself. As soon as she could get to a computer she wrote her resignation letter.

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It is *you* who can and must initiate change for yourself. Your epiphany will be the moment when you realise that you have this power. You can be creative

about solutions instead of being stuck in the same groove believing there is nothing else you can do. You will find the courage to take action when you tell someone what you will do, maybe by cracking a joke, or perhaps by making it an occasion. Whatever works for you, make the decision and take the first step.

As you begin to talk about what you want, you will find the support that you need to make it happen. You will find someone who says 'I did it. You can, too. You will find life is as interesting and rewarding after Medicine as before. It will be different and you will experience new challenges, but overall it will be satisfying and rewarding.'

#### **Pulsepoints**

- It's up to you to be open and to recognise possibilities when they present themselves to you.

#### **Prescription**

- What do you want for your life after Medicine?
- What impact will these changes have on the rest of your life?
- Which doors will open and which ones will close?
- What new opportunities will you have?

Leaving the medical profession can be a difficult transition to make, whether it is planned or thrust upon you by circumstances. You may experience opposition not only from other people but also from yourself.

You may be aware of an inner voice telling you that what you are doing or about to do is a mistake. Many doctors feel guilty about leaving the profession and worry about how they will fill their days when they are no longer dealing with patients.

Be clear about what you hope to gain from leaving Medicine. It's usually preferable to be clear about what you do want even if your main motivation is to move away from something you don't want.

**Pulsepoints**

Your motivation to leave Medicine may depend on whether you are:

- moving away from a heavy workload
- no longer wanting to be part of the medical profession
- leaving because of external pressures from family
- leaving because of internal pressures, such as illness
- retiring or leaving Medicine because there are many things you want to do instead
- moving away from painful experiences, such as unhelpful colleagues
- moving towards pleasurable experiences, such as new opportunities for travel or work.

**Prescription**

- Keep focused on your goals.
- Be more creative in your thinking.
- Open your mind to many different ways to achieve what you want.

There are nearly always several options available for achieving the same result, and when you involve others to support you, you will have people to whom you can talk and with whom you can share your experiences.

I experienced something similar when I took the plunge in 1997 and decided to leave Medicine. It took me about a year of considering the pros and cons of doing this before I finally wrote a letter of resignation, worked through my three months' notice and then at long last said goodbye to life as a doctor.

I was lucky, I suppose, that it was entirely my choice to leave, so I had the luxury of time on my side.

However, if the reason for you leaving Medicine is something that you haven't had much time to consider, or about which you have no choice – for example, if you have been suspended, or told that you must leave on mental or physical health grounds – the emotional shock and disruption will be very acute and probably more emotionally traumatic than my own experiences. It's not only making the decision to leave that is a huge step, but also the wondering and worrying about what to do next.

My colleagues and even my family did their best to dissuade me from leaving the profession by telling me that I was too young to retire, that I was good at my job, that the patients would ask for me, and that I would pine for the work and not find anything as interesting to do. They pestered me with questions and comments, such as ‘What are you going to do with yourself?’ and ‘You’ll be bored when you no longer see patients.’

I asked myself the same thing, and worried that what they said could well be true. What I loved about medical work was connecting with people, listening to their concerns and then by logical processes of deduction, examination and investigations, where indicated, coming to a conclusion about how to advise and treat them. I didn’t know for sure what I would do with my time or how I would deal with the gap there would be in my life, and with missing the work itself. I had doubts and moments when I almost did as they suggested and stayed, yet the strong wish to do something different remained. I knew what I had to do.

I was certainly rather hazy about my plans for a life beyond Medicine. I knew that I wanted to be more creative and to do things I had never had time for while I was busy with the demands of a family and medical work. I was very clear that I wanted to do something different – to change my life. It was time to follow my heart and do what I wanted to do. It would be ‘me’ time. I was confident that I would find something which would be as interesting and satisfying as my years as a doctor had been. At the time, however, I wasn’t quite sure what that would be.

I enjoyed reading popular psychology books, and attended counselling and personal development workshops and completed degree courses in psychology and counselling. I was fascinated by exploring the person beyond the illness and finding out what ‘makes people tick.’ I was sure that if I was alert to opportunities, something suitable would present itself to me – and eventually it did! I read about life coaching in a magazine, and I knew that this was a perfect match for what I was seeking. I decided to train as a life coach. The training involved two years of telephone classes, and during that time I coached many people and also became very comfortable with coaching on the telephone – a very different experience to being face to face with a patient. I also benefited personally from working with a coach, finding time to do those things I was too busy to do while working as a doctor. I’ve written several books and hope to complete more. I enjoy travelling the world and living by the sea in Cornwall.

As a result of becoming a coach, I found a way of looking at problems as challenges and learned ways of helping people to find their own solutions.

As a doctor I was expected to be ‘the expert’ and to know all the answers. When I qualified in Medicine back in 1967 there was a very paternalistic attitude to the patient–doctor relationship. Consultations consisted of the patient saying ‘Here is my problem, what can you do about it?’ As a doctor I was expected to use my skill and experience to decide the source of the problem, determine what had to be investigated and know how to treat the patient’s problem.

As a life coach I’ve learned to use a different approach. I encourage people to find their own answers to their challenges. For example, I help them to free up time to do what they want to do. I encourage them to eliminate ‘time wasters’, delegate some tasks, do others more efficiently and drop some ‘to do’s’ completely. In this way they can enjoy a more balanced life. They realise that what they dream of doing is within their grasp if they work out the first steps that they need to take. I share my own experiences, if they are relevant, but I no longer assume that my way is the only way. I have become more tolerant of diversity. I am the catalyst which enables people to make the changes they want in their lives. Thirty years as a medical practitioner had given me a special insight into the lifestyle of doctors, so I specialised as a doctor’s coach.

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Several clients talked about their wish to leave Medicine before the usual retirement age. Because I had done this myself, I realised that I had something to offer those doctors to enable them to decide the best way forward.

Unfortunately, because low morale, stress and frustration are common among doctors who are thinking about leaving Medicine sooner rather than later, even though this is a major life transition and involves more than just giving up a job, it is something many doctors consider from time to time. It is a huge change to contemplate, not only in terms of lifestyle but also in terms of role in society and identity as perceived by others. As a result, many doctors go no further than thinking about the possibility before carrying on as before.

However, if you are someone who wants to take that big leap, be aware that when you leave the medical profession, no matter how often you say ‘That’s it – I’m done with Medicine’, you will continue to prick up your ears when you see or hear someone who is discussing their operation or who looks unwell and you wonder what’s wrong with them. You can’t help mulling over what people say about their doctor and wonder whether you should intervene and suggest another investigation or a different medication. Not only that, but people will still think of you as a doctor and continue to believe

that you know everything and anything about health and disease, whatever your past specialty. They say 'once a doctor, always a doctor', and some can't resist asking your opinion about medically related matters about which you may never have known very much. Someone once said to me 'Being a doctor is a bit like Brighton rock – you'll always have "doctor" written right through you.'

If I'd known about coaching while I was working as a doctor, perhaps I wouldn't have left Medicine when I did. Coaching could have helped me to realise how vital it is to look after one's physical and emotional needs, and that balance in all areas of life is paramount. I would have learned about the importance of boundaries, and would have said 'no' more often to demands made of me.

However, I don't have any regrets about my own decision to leave Medicine, and because I coach doctors I still have a strong connection with doctors' lives and lifestyles.

Over the past few years I've learned about and encouraged my clients to get rid of the many things that drain them and their energy, and to increase those activities that increase their energy. This is one of the simple, common-sense strategies which will make a huge difference to your life whether you are in the profession or moving into life after Medicine.

This book aims to motivate you to plan and then enjoy your life after Medicine. It offers you simple ways to do this and so live the life you truly want.

Too many people are living in a way that is not what they want. Instead of wondering what happened to your dreams of life as a doctor and being resigned to the way things have turned out, you can now decide to do what will make a difference to your life.

You may have reached the top of your specialty in the medical profession and be revered by your colleagues as an expert in your field of interest, but if you are not satisfied and happy, there are things you can do to make a difference, in or out of Medicine.

Perhaps you have been on a path dedicated to your medical success which you believed would bring you the rewards you deserved. Maybe you thought that your life, especially your personal life, was 'on hold' until such time, but now, as you consider life after Medicine, you realise that something has been and is missing and you want to do things differently from now onwards, whatever your age. Life has moved on and you are coming to terms with the fact that there will never be that mythical time when everything is 'sorted.'

The most important thing now as you leave Medicine is to stop regretting what might have been and to start to live the life you want without further delay. You can begin to introduce new interests into your days, and when you do that, not only will your life be transformed for the better, but also the people around you will adjust to you, and will change their attitude towards you. You will be different, because you will become more focused, more motivated and more able to move towards what you want.

### **Pulsepoints**

Think about the stress you have experienced while working as a doctor, and realise that when you leave you will say goodbye to:

- the long hours
- too much responsibility
- a lack of work–life balance
- the need for better personal relationships
- no time in which to do things outside of work.

As you start to experience a life after Medicine, all of these things can be put behind you.

### **Prescription**

Introduce whatever is most important that has been missing from your life.

- Make a list of what you want to achieve.
- Monitor your progress week by week.

Life is more than just the work you do or did. It's also about your friends and family, your partner, your children and your community. It's about fulfilling your own wishes, too, so you need time to connect with nature, to sit and stare, to walk up mountains, or to be by the ocean. Allow yourself to be creative, take part in sport, play music, paint, or whatever makes your heart sing or connects you with your inner emotional self. You must not forget that your emotions and your body are as much a part of you as your logical mind.

If you are using age as an excuse for not taking on the challenge to do what you really want to do, consider that even if your joints may creak a little, perhaps it's the inflexibility of your mind rather than of your body which is stopping you!

**Pulsepoints**

Spend a few hours listening to what you and others say in day-to-day conversation. Notice the words used and the assumptions made. Do you hear yourself saying:

- 'I'm no good at so and so'
- 'I'm dreading tomorrow'
- 'It's an awful journey to get from A to B'
- 'I can't do that – what will they think of me?'

**Prescription**

If the above statements sound similar to some things you say regularly, change the words to change your life:

- 'I can do it'
- 'I'm looking forward to tomorrow'
- 'I love travelling from A to B'
- 'I know what I want to do and others admire what I do.'

Believe in yourself and what you can achieve even at this new stage of life – your life after Medicine.

**Pulsepoints**

The secret of coping with transition and change is simple – look after yourself as well as or even better than you look after others.

**Prescription**

If you are overtired and have been stressed and overwhelmed by the demands of a busy medical job for years, take the opportunity when you first leave Medicine to:

- relax
- contemplate your new situation
- decide in an unhurried way how you will occupy yourself.

Some people cope with leaving Medicine by immediately becoming involved in too many things.

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You may continue to work like Dr Yellow, who did his own locum as well as joining a gym which he goes to each day, taking sailing lessons and travelling all over the country each weekend to visit his children and grandchildren.

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What will you do to fill the gap left by not doing your medical work?

Will you take things easy or work a new busy schedule?

As always, it is best to strike a balance. If you do little at first, use the time to plan new activities. However, if you jump straight into a busy new schedule, remember to take a few deep breaths from time to time, to relax and realise that you can take things more easily.

Since your life as a doctor has always been demanding and busy, you will need to take some time to adapt to behaving differently when you leave Medicine, and to change the way you view life. You could compare yourself and your life after Medicine to a battery. Some batteries suddenly go flat and have to be disposed of when they no longer have any power left in them. However, others are rechargeable, so can be made as good as new, ready to work efficiently again.

Think of this as a metaphor for your life. When you think that life has 'gone flat', it is possible to do something to recharge your batteries, too. To achieve this:

- let go for a while
- stop striving, and just be
- remember that whatever is happening is what is right for you now.

#### **Pulsepoints**

Instead of jumping into your new life with little idea of what to do, develop a plan of action.

#### **Prescription**

- What could you do?
- When can you do it?
- How will you go about it?
- What would you really enjoy?
- What creative activities will you start?

When you know what you want, you can devise ways to achieve it. There is life after Medicine. Find out how to make it the best for you.