

From Formby to Family Planning NSW

From Formby to Oxford University, Borneo, Tanzania, Hong Kong and Australia, Dr Deborah Bateson's career has been about following her passions ...

FORMBY is a commuter town behind the dunes which separate it from the Irish Sea, north of Liverpool, in the northwest corner of England. It is famous for its summer tourism industry, its wildlife – the endangered red squirrel and the natterjack toad are residents – and music hall entertainer George Formby, who adopted it as his stage name when he was waiting for a train and saw a goods train on its way to Formby.

It is, in every other way, completely unremarkable, and Dr Deborah Bateson couldn't wait to get out of it.

Now the Medical Director of Family Planning NSW, Dr Bateson's career has, she says, involved a lot of luck and happenstance, but it was always clear she would be going on to great things.

"I just really wanted to get out of Formby, to be honest," Dr Bateson tells the *MJA*.

"Never forget you can make a huge difference to people's lives"

At the local comprehensive she was good at science, chemistry and physics, and was fortunate enough to go through in an era when young women were being encouraged to go on to tertiary education.

"I had a fabulous chemistry teacher and a determined headmaster who was very keen to get someone from his school into Oxford University," she says. "They were very concerned about their elitist image at Oxford and I was a girl from the north of England, wanting to study science, so I fitted the bill."

In the A to Z of her careers flipbook, A was for air traffic controller and B was for biochemist, which sounded like the better option, and so she became the only person in her year in

Somerville College, Oxford – alma mater to Margaret Thatcher, Indira Gandhi and Dorothy L Sayers, among many others – to study biochemistry.

While completing her 4-year stay at Oxford, Dr Bateson didn't let the grass grow under her feet. She followed a Somerville College tutor to India, working as a nanny while the tutor completed her economics research on small agrarian economies.

"I was very adventurous, and I wanted to get out and see the world. India really opened my eyes."

In her last year at Oxford in 1981, Dr Bateson joined the Exploration Club,¹ which took her about as far as it was possible to get from Formby.

"I led an expedition ... to Borneo," she says. "I wanted to go to the most exotic place that was the least like Formby, so we went to Sabah (on the northern part of the island), collecting the virus-carrying insect

pests of oil palms, and sending them back to Oxford.

Then followed a trip through Kenya and southern Sudan, before returning to the UK – "I knew I had to settle down and do something serious" – where she picked up a scholarship to the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, to study human nutrition as a Master of Science, which she completed in 1984. Part of her scholarship included support from the British government to work overseas, and she headed back to Africa where she worked as a nutritionist in a hospital in Mbeya, in the southwest of Tanzania.

"That's when I realised that what I really wanted to do was study medicine."

By now married to an Australian, Dr Bateson came here and began applying for medical schools until her husband was offered a job in Hong Kong, "so, I followed him there".

She applied to the University of Hong Kong but was initially rejected, so she studied Cantonese to show her persistence and worked in the microbiology department of the university until she was accepted.

"It was a fascinating place to study" Dr Bateson says. "We saw complex conditions with many patients travelling from mainland China for treatment, spent time in the tuberculosis sanitariums and I did my general practice term with the Gurkha regiment ... It was an exceptional medical school."

Dr Bateson graduated in 1993 and the family – now including two daughters with a third delivered a few months later – returned to Australia.

An internship at St Vincent's Hospital Sydney followed and at one point, as a resident, she found herself working on the famous Ward 17 South, with the legendary Professor David Cooper, caring for patients with AIDS.

It was during a stint in the emergency department that she was offered a place on a family planning course – and suddenly everything clicked into place.

"I realised that I had found my spiritual home," says Dr Bateson. "It is such a privilege to learn about the most intimate part of people's lives and to be able to make a difference. I was lucky enough



Dr Deborah Bateson

to find a great mentor, the doyenne of Family Planning, Dr Edith Weisberg, and realised that the combination of the social, political and advocacy aspects of medicine together with clinical work suited me perfectly."

Since 2010, Dr Bateson has been the Medical Director of Family Planning NSW,² broken up by a stint as Global Medical Director of Marie Stopes International³ – an "amazing organisation delivering contraception, family planning and safe abortion services across the globe".

"It was a great opportunity and I learned an enormous amount, but the one thing I couldn't do in that job was continue clinical practice" says Dr Bateson.

"I didn't realise what a loss it was going to be to give that up."

So, she returned to Australia from Marie Stopes' base in London and resumed her position at Family Planning NSW,

including one day a week working in clinics at Fairfield, Dubbo and Penrith, with multicultural, Indigenous and young people.

"My role at Family Planning NSW has inspired me to pursue my passions"

Dr Bateson says, "particularly around contraception, safe abortion and cervical screening – collaborating with colleagues across many disciplines in Australia and internationally. Family Planning has been extraordinary in supporting women and men's reproductive and sexual health over many decades and I have felt honored to be a part of this important organisation."

It's a unique career path that provides a teaching moment to medical students and young doctors so what advice does she have?

"Follow your passion," she says. "Don't be too worried if things go a little bit

sideways at times. I came to medicine quite late, persisted with some things, but also took some sideways moves. Make sure you have the right balance between your work and personal life – I know it sounds a bit cliched, but it's important.

"You don't want to burn out. Ensure you have time for other things in life.

"Medicine is an incredibly rewarding career. It is a great privilege to be able to listen to people's stories. And never forget that as a clinician you can make a huge difference in people's lives."

References

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