

Medical degree? The world is your oyster

Dr Stewart Condon, President of MSF Australia, says a medical degree is a doorway to the rest of the world

DR Stewart Condon, President of Médecins sans Frontières (MSF) Australia, learned early that his medical vocation lay outside big cities, but it wasn't because he was born in the country.

In fact, he grew up in Adelaide and did his medical training in Sydney, where his training in big urban tertiary referral hospitals showed him that there were people beyond those settings who needed more.

"As I got through medical school, I saw more need outside of the cities," he tells the *MJA*. "I saw great medicine [in those hospitals] but I also saw populations who didn't need maybe as much as the other places I was visiting."

Dr Condon did an elective in Broome, Western Australia, 6 months in Alice Springs, Northern Territory, and spent one of his GP terms in Cobar in central New South Wales. "I saw a massive imbalance and that's what really attracted me to do rural and remote medicine, as well as what attracted me to MSF."

His first contact with MSF came in the late 1990s when an experienced MSF volunteer spoke to medical students about travelling with a medical degree. Missions followed for Dr Condon in Sudan, and then in Aceh province in Indonesia, shortly after the devastating 2004 tsunami.

"I found that trying to do a mission every year and then coming back and tending to my practice here in Australia worked really well for me," he says.

Dr Condon was elected to the MSF Australia board in 2011, re-elected in 2014 and 2017, and has been its President since July 2014. He makes sure he "keeps his hand in" clinically by working as a locum in emergency departments (EDs) two or three times a week.

"At present I have a governance function in MSF ... but it's still important for me to see patients. Working part-time in EDs works well for me. I can find work in many different places in the roles that I like as a senior non-specialist and still be connected to MSF in Sydney."

At 44 years old, Dr Condon is still a young man in terms of his career. Where does he see himself in 10 years?

"I can't [run MSF Australia] forever," he says. "It's a young person's organisation. To give that freshness we need the young people coming through."

"At the end of 2019, it will be almost 9 years on the board and almost 4 as president. I love it, but I also think having those young people coming through at MSF in those senior roles is really important for us."

"We've got a really strong conversation happening about diversity and inclusion. We've had staff who have come from white European backgrounds in senior leadership positions at MSF for far too long. We've probably not been able to get leaders from African missions to come up through coordinator roles to work in HQ in the ways that we've imagined, and we've struggled to get Asian clinicians in similar roles."

"We're really focused on trying to improve the inclusion and diversity of thought in MSF."

What would Dr Condon tell a roomful of medical students about the value of their medical degree and volunteering for organisations like MSF Australia?

"I love the fact that many of us come into medicine wanting to change the world, wanting to do good," he says.

"Remembering that as you start your career, and make career

choices as you go further, is key. We can [change the world].

"We can't just say 'well, that was too hard, and I just need to be a vascular surgeon now'. We can [change the world] as the vascular surgeon, I would argue.

We can change particular individual patients' outcomes, but you can change the world by being an amazing vascular surgeon, by thinking about going to work in low- and middle-income countries that need a vascular surgeon just as much as the practice that you have here.

"The other key point is that there's no career path that you can't do. Anything is possible.

"Have a think about doing other medicine generally before you go into [specialist] training. Give yourself that broad experience before you limit yourself later on, just so you know that you've tried other things.

"It's difficult, but keeping an open mind about these different possibilities is really key. Keep the sense that you can continue to change the world, no matter what role you do."

"You don't have to be the next Rowan Gillies or the next whoever. Become the next you – keep that sense of naivety, keep that sense of questioning and joy.

"Medicine is an amazing role. The world is your oyster, you can take it anywhere that you want."



Dr Stewart Condon. Photo courtesy of Médecins sans Frontières Australia.

"There's no career path that you can't do. Anything is possible"

Cate Swannell

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