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Features

Exclusive with Dr Riaz Agha

Let me introduce you to Dr Riaz Agha, PRHO, editor and entrepreneur, from the exterior, he may seem to be merely another medical student, who successfully graduated last summer from GKT (with distinctions in Medical Sciences and Special Studies); however, Riaz's resume [1] may far surpass all your achievements combined, for he was not idle with his time! Apart from completing his degree, Riaz has published over 15 articles in scientific journals, won 21 prizes and established the 'International Journal of Surgery' [2]. He is now the Managing and Executive Editor of this influential journal, which is consulted by surgeons worldwide and whose articles were recently covered by the Wall Street Journal, Forbes, Fox News, USA Today, Boston Globe, ABC News, Voice of America and Reuters amongst others.

At the start of November, I had the pleasure of meeting Riaz after his long shift in Oncology at Guy's Hospital. We met in Starbucks, Riaz was dressed smartly and looked excited about talking to me, he described his busy job as a PRHO (new F1 recruit), working constantly from 0830 to around 1800. It is a change for him as dealing with cancer patients differs from his previous placement on General Medicine.

I previously met Riaz a year ago, at an event centred on incorporating science ideas into business ventures. From the outset, Riaz was generous with his advice and experience of medical school. He came across as a determined, ambitious young man, who is also modest about his achievements. Growing up in the east end of London and going to a local comprehensive, at age 16 he won a scholarship to the private Chigwell School. Riaz was not successful in his first application to medical school but admits, it was the best thing that has happened to him. He, instead, spent his year out at Harrods working full-time selling toys. He realised there; "being successful in life is all about selling, people who are successful, are often good communicators, who are able to put across their ideas and move people across to their position (and therefore make a sale) or at the very least move them to a point within their sphere of influence where they can be leveraged to help them achieve their goals. If you study politicians this is their business and you can learn a lot from them. Similarly a painting bought for £60,000 can be sold 2 years later for £600,000 - the perception has become real even though it's the same painting or set of brush strokes."

Riaz did his elective at Harvard and this made him realise how closely linked business and healthcare were. He understood how his medical degree consisted of understanding new concepts all the time and learning a lot of knowledge by

rote, training his mind in a very vigorous way. As he progressed through medical school, Riaz felt increasingly entrepreneurial, he found that he could leverage his knowledge and contacts to launch the International Journal of Surgery, and become the first student ever to launch a global journal! "The creative freedom that comes with being an entrepreneur is truly liberating; to be able to work ideas up from scratch and create something meaningful where before there was nothing. When you pull the rabbit out of the hat, people always ask how you did it, but it's all to do with your mindset. Once you launch something, you need to focus on product development and passionately creating something truly great. For instance, in 2005, we not only published high quality papers and got a lot of press coverage but we also recruited top people like Professor Thomas E. Starzl (the most cited man in clinical medical medicine and father of transplantation) and Lord Robert Winston (Past- President of the British Association for the Advancement of Science and a regular presenter on BBC science programs)."

Students often ask him how he has achieved so much. According to him, students need to be "feverishly passionate" about medicine and to change their original way of thinking by setting goals and making plans. Riaz's advice has been captured in his book "Making sense of your medical career" [3], which describes in a succinct and rather personal approach, the ways of becoming successful in medicine (its also quite popular selling 6000 copies in the first 9 months). The first chapter "Career building starts in the mind" importantly details the need to develop yourself before embarking on your career. It is a good practical career guide, and draws upon Riaz's knowledge of intercalated BSc's, electives, publishing a book, job applications and writing the winning CV! This book is definitely worth a look at, not only to get Riaz's perspective but also to learn new ways of approaching medicine.

What do peers think of his success? Those who are younger than Riaz are happy for him as they are able to learn from what he has achieved. He says that students need to know their goals and also realise that there are other career options than the standard medical specialities, for example, medical publishing or healthcare technology. He comments that "you have to be feverishly passionate and enjoy working hard but at times you may need to be defensive as well. Some people may get irritated by your success and you need to stay on guard against certain people. If you have solid reasons for doing what you are doing, then no one can touch you. In time you will develop your own inner circle and will find out one way or another who your true friends are."

And what of his future? After F1, Riaz hopes to take a well-earned year out to develop some of his ideas full time. "I want to spend more time developing the International Journal of Surgery and other publishing, business and healthcare technology ventures. I want to leave my options open and see what I am feverishly passionate about."

It would do all students good to take a leaf out of Riaz's book (literally and metaphorically). His creativity, determination and positive attitude will hopefully be able to knock a lot of apathetic students out of their spoonfed med school monotony. Although we may know this, sometimes it takes someone like Riaz to tell you bluntly that "your future is what you make of it, make sure you grab every opportunity given to you, do not be passive, use your mind and discover what you really enjoy". I am certain Riaz will be a continued success which ever path he chooses.

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References

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2. subscribe to the journal at www.int-journal-surgery.com
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