

The ultimate junior doctor

Riaz Agha is 26 and graduated from medical school last August. He is a foundation year one house officer, but unlike most of his peers, he has already written more than 10 scientific papers, won more than 20 prizes, founded an international peer reviewed journal, and been included in the 2006's *Who's Who*. **David King** finds out more

Why did you decide to study medicine?

Medicine was the only career that combined all the subjects I loved, and I also wanted a job where I would be working with people. I nearly didn't get into medical school. The first time I applied I didn't even get an interview, let alone any offers. I therefore took a gap year and worked at Harrods for a year as a sales associate. Looking back, this was one of the best things that could have happened to me. I learnt far more about communicating with people than from any communication skills session at university. Fortunately, I managed to secure four A grades at A level, and the second time I applied to medical school I received an unconditional offer from Guy's, King's, and St Thomas' School of Medicine. I took up my place there in 1999 and haven't looked back since.

Did you try to distinguish yourself from other students when you arrived at medical school?

Most students only start thinking about applying for jobs after they qualify. I adopted a different approach and began building my CV from the moment I first entered medical school, based on my particular interests. I became president of the surgical society and the chess society and vice president of the salsa society. I intercalated in anatomy between the second and third year, achieving a first class honours degree. I also managed to get my name on a number of publications and win some prizes.

You launched the *International Journal of Surgery* in your fourth year. Why did you decide to set up a journal, and how did you achieve it?

I wanted to start something long term at medical school. Looking at the journals that were currently available I felt that many were too specialised, dry, slow in processing manuscripts, and were failing in their duty to place themselves at the centre of debate. I also saw how some journals seemed to be dominated by content from the United States or the United Kingdom. I wanted to build a truly global multidisciplinary journal. I envisaged a new journal, which would publish research on surgery from all over the world, but setting up the journal was far from easy. I had a few contacts from my time as president of the surgical society and they agreed to get involved. Then I emailed people and managed to get some content for the journal. I set up a website to get subscriptions, and amazingly 200 people subscribed. Together with my own savings and income from advertising, this gave me enough money to publish and distribute the first three issues, which I did on my own.

What is the current status of the journal?

The journal has gone from strength to strength. The global market leader in journal publishing, Elsevier, became interested, and in October 2004—exactly one year

after the journal had been launched—I signed a deal with them to become my publishing partners. We now have a circulation of 4000, and it is growing all the time. When I first launched the journal I was ridiculed, and a professor of surgery told me I would never get anyone to submit original research. That same professor has now joined my editorial board and we are receiving original research from all over the world. Recently, one of our papers was featured in a front page article in the *Wall Street Journal* (written by a 2005 Pulitzer Prize winning journalist) and was also covered by many other news agencies, such as ABC News, Reuters, Forbes, and Fox News. This massively increased the profile of the journal. I retain an active role in the running of the journal, as its managing and executive editor, and ultimately it is my ambition to see it become the best general surgical journal in the world.


You recently published a book, *Making Sense of Your Medical Career: Your Strategic Guide to Success*. Where did you get the idea for the book, and what are you hoping it will achieve?

To work in the most competitive specialties, successful applicants are expected to have fulfilled certain criteria. Most medical students receive little or no careers advice at medical school, however, and do not have a clue what is required. Some information is available, but it is scattered across several sources, such as the *studentBMJ* and Career Focus in *BMJ Careers*, and other careers publications. I wanted to collect all this advice into one book, together with the knowledge and experience I accumulated at medical school. Put simply, this book tells you everything you need to know to become successful in medicine. It advises you on whether to do an intercalated degree, where to go for your elective, how to handle interviews, how to write a scientific paper, and even how to publish a book.¹ Within these pages is all you need to successfully apply for your dream job.

Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

I am extremely interested in healthcare entrepreneurship. Launching the journal and writing the book were visceral experiences. I enjoy working on them and developing them. Although I am not sure exactly what my future career holds, I know that I want to be part of a creative process, in which I can be free to explore my own ideas without preset limitations.

If you could give one piece of advice to a student just starting medical school, what would it be?

Buy my book. But seriously, take the time to find out what your interests are and what you are passionate about. Remember that anything is possible, and if you think creatively and are determined, you can quickly generate great opportunities for yourself. What you can achieve is only limited by your imagination. 

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¹ Agha R. *Making Sense of Your Medical Career: Your Strategic Guide to Success*. London: Hodder Arnold, 2005. www.yourmedicalcareer.com.



Further information

- The *International Journal of Surgery* is published by Elsevier. A year's subscription for students is available at the discounted price of £48. Further information is available at www.int-journal-surgery.com.