

## Letter from Australia

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### ON MOTIVATION

As a child, I never wanted to be anything but a doctor. It has never occurred to me that I might have been happier doing something else. To have the privilege of helping other people has always been sufficient motivation for me and I count myself very lucky to have had work that held such great and lasting personal meaning. Of course, there have been times when it has been difficult to remain motivated. The internal politics of a large hospital can be fierce at times, when one's colleagues jostle for power, space or other scarce resources. Struggling for the sake of protecting your own department against a perceived threat is distracting. Some people seem to thrive on that, but I have never enjoyed any kind of conflict, even though I know that I have usually prevailed when action was required. I have been able to remain motivated by reminding myself why I became a doctor: not to build an empire or to enrich myself, but to make the world a better place. What stronger motivation could there be?

It is sad when colleagues become disillusioned. Thirty odd years ago, those of us who had passed our college fellowship examinations were invited to a cocktail party with some of the consultants who had been our tutors leading up to the examination. For whatever reason, the consultant neurologist, a superb diagnostician and teacher, declared to all and sundry that he was absolutely bored stiff with neurology! It was hard for us to believe at the time, but as I look back from my vantage point near the end of a long career, I acknowledge that it is possible to become bored, especially after having mastered a particular field. It takes effort to remain fresh. This is why some universities allow staff to take sabbatical leave, to travel, undertake research, or complete some writing. Medicine also offers opportunities to change careers. Some of my paediatrician colleagues have become allergists; a paediatric surgeon retrained as a child psychiatrist. A brilliant neurosurgeon retrained as a radiologist after he had served the full term allowed at two teaching hospitals. I myself have been refreshed and reinvigorated by combining my original training in endocrinology with a new interest in international child health.

What motivates people? For some, it is altruism. For others, it is ambition, the desire to be famous or to have high status. Others are motivated by money. Procedural specialties such as cardiology, gastroenterology and surgery always attract greater numbers of trainees than non-procedural specialties such as endocrinology or psychiatry because earning power is more if you are skilled in a procedure. It is reasonable for a brilliant cardiac surgeon or transplant surgeon to have a very high income because what they

do is extremely difficult and requires long training. They provide the services and are well paid for them. It is when services are provided *in order* to make a lot of money that the line is crossed and the practitioner is motivated to over-service, to extract as much money from the patient as possible. This is a travesty of what medicine should be.

Fear of litigation also saps motivation. A doctor whose actions become defensive is thinking of his own best interests and not those of the patient. We are currently seeing this in Australia, where doctors in one state have decided to seek court authorization for surgery to correct ambiguous genitalia in infants born with disorders of sex development. The outcome is that the courts always uphold the proposals of the doctors, thus greatly reducing the risk of future litigation, but it costs \$20–30 000 to run each case and the patient's best interests are of secondary importance.

Leaders motivate people in various ways. Generally, a leader is someone who is admired to such an extent that people want to follow his or her example. A great leader has the capacity to inspire people, to give their life meaning and to make them want to emulate their example. Gandhi clearly had this effect on millions of Indian people. Martin Luther King inspired and motivated the African American people to defy the authorities and oppose segregation. Nelson Mandela's example of forgiveness and reconciliation inspired a nation to move on after the apartheid era in South Africa. In medicine, leaders are required to find ways of motivating staff to keep on going, even though their working conditions may be terrible and their salaries may be inadequate. One way of doing this is by giving the staff a vision that gives meaning to their work and which makes them see where their contribution fits in to the whole. I find that in Asia loyalty to the best interests of the community is a powerful motivator, whereas in the West, people are more likely to be motivated by self-interest—the promise of better conditions, more money or perhaps just an honorary academic title. The opportunity to do research is a powerful incentive, given that it leads to publications, professional advancement and fame. Research is also a very satisfying activity for those with strong intellectual curiosity and a naturally sceptical disposition.

A medical career may span four or even five decades. Every day, a medical practitioner carries great responsibility and is faced with new challenges. If one feels strongly motivated to make the world a better place, it is a joy to be a doctor and difficult decisions can be made with a sense of purpose.

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