



North Western Deanery Careers

Book review

“Getting ahead in medicine - a guide to personal skills for doctors”

Title: *“Getting ahead in medicine - a guide to personal skills for doctors”*

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Publisher: BIOS Scientific

ISBN: 1-859960-21-9

“Getting ahead in medicine” is based on the teaching sessions that a group of anaesthetists have done with their trainees. It is a slim reference book, and designed for trainees to select the sections that are relevant to them at their particular stage in their career. They divide the book into four levels:

- Level 1 students and preregistration house officers
- Level 2 senior house officers
- Level 3 registrars
- Level 4 experienced registrar or newly appointed consultant.

As soon as I saw the terms “house officer” and “senior house officer” I turned to see when the book was published and found it was 1998. In other words, this was written when today's foundation doctors were starting at high school. I will come back to this issue later.

The chapter headings are:

- Getting a job
- Organising yourself
- Structured training
- Teaching and learning
- Computers and information technology
- Talks and lectures
- Visual aids
- Quality in medicine
- Research

Getting things done
Begin a consultant job
The structure of health care
Society, medicine and doctors.

Considering the scale of the changes since this book was written, the chapter on getting a job is surprisingly relevant. There is a section on producing a CV, and an explanation of person specifications and how they are the basis of shortlisting. The rest of the material is now only relevant to those applying for consultant posts, since foundation and specialty training have centralised systems.

The chapter on organising yourself also contains some sensible hints and tips, but jumbles up advice to the house officer and the newly appointed consultant in such a way that you would need to read the whole chapter and just pick out the bits that were relevant to you.

The chapter on structured training is out of date, but having described the old system of training it then goes on to include some useful information about appraisal, assessment and mentoring. I think this section might be of use to a senior trainee or newly appointed consultant.

The chapter on teaching and learning is one of the strongest in the book. It explains the theoretical basis for the changes we have seen in medical education recently, and is surprisingly up-to-date. This would be certainly useful to a trainee just starting to take on teaching responsibilities. There is also some material on how to prepare for examinations, which is pitched at a much lower level. I cannot believe that there are many potential readers of this book who would need to be told what an MCQ or OSCE mean.

The chapter on computers and information technology filled me with nostalgia for the days of floppy disks and 33.6 kbps fax/modems. There is nothing in this chapter that would be news to anyone under 80.

The chapter on “talks and lectures” is again full of sensible practical advice, and together with the section on education is one of the most worthwhile sections in the book.

The following chapter on visual aids is now out of date since glass slides and overhead projectors have been vanquished by PowerPoint. There are some sensible points about graphic design.

The chapter on quality is really about audit. There was a description of "quality circles" which vanished from the scene recently. I think this chapter would be useful for somebody new to the concept of doing an audit, and wanting to know some background to this. There is also some description of evidence-based medicine which I think junior trainees would find useful for the description of absolute and relative risk reductions and number needed to treat calculation.

It is followed by a chapter on research which again would be useful for a foundation or other junior trainee wanting to get their first experience of research.

The chapter on "getting things done" is an introduction to NHS management, pitched at the level of foundation doctors. It is not in the sort of depth that an ST6 or ST7 would go into on a management course prior to taking up a consultant post. It mainly deals with basic management concepts, so has not dated too badly.

This is not true of the following chapter on starting as a consultant. It predates the 2003 contract so is no longer relevant at all. Much the same is true of the next chapter, on the structure of health care.

The final chapter on "Society, medicine and doctors" is interesting, covering some ethical dilemmas and history. It is worth a read.

I think the main strength of this book is that there is a lot of useful content in a clear readable style. The authors have the skill of giving both sides of the question but are not afraid to state their opinions as well. Everything is written in straightforward English with no irritating buzzwords.

The two main reservations are that this book is 13 years old so for medical training and IT the world is unrecognisable. A lesser criticism is that the chapters seemed in a slightly random order. This is not a huge problem as the book is intended to be a reference work; nevertheless it seemed a bit odd that in the section on visual aids in chapter 7 flipcharts were described as a management consultant fad without any attempt to link them to the material on small group teaching in chapter 4.

I think the books concept as something you could dip into at the appropriate stage in your career falls down as during the time a trainee takes from being a foundation doctor to a consultant there will be so many changes in the NHS and the wider world that the book will become out of date. One other reservation I have about a book is that in the modern world there is an obsession with generating evidence. I think the trainee of today would expect to do an online learning module and print out the certificate for their portfolio.

Review by David Burch in April 2011

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