



Book Review

So you want to be a medical mum?

By Dr Emma Hill

“So you want to be a medical mum?”

Dr Emma Hill

Oxford University Press, 2008

£11.95

Pp176

ISBN: 978 0 19 923758 6

Introduction

“So you want to be a medical mum?” is a short and readable text aimed at the numerous women who enter the medical world with the thought of having children one day at the back of their mind. Whether they will ever pick this book up prior to making that fateful decision and getting on with the process is rather more difficult to predict. More than half is dedicated to family planning and pregnancy. Rather less of the content relates to those who have taken the leap and now face the added challenge of what to do now that we have children and still want to work.

Content

The author uses quotes and vignettes from parents and doctors interspersed with practical information to document the challenges and decision-making of women with children in medicine. Where relevant she has added sections on NHS policy, maternity rights and the law as well as more immediately practical advice such as how often to have sex to get pregnant in the first place. It's not until you get to chapter 12 that the discussion turns to the practicalities (or rather impracticalities) of being a working mum.

The book chapters follow through the timeline of planning pregnancy, being pregnant in different careers in medicine, giving birth and what to do with yourself (and your child) afterwards. It is clear, if not surprising, that there is no right answer to the questions posed. It is equally clear that there are many female doctors who are, or have been, in the same position and who can provide considerable support. Several of the chapters are only 2-3 pages long so don't expect any detailed discussion of the pros and cons of avoiding blue cheese and that glass of wine you were used to after work.

The chapters on employment law, maternity pay and money matters are probably the most useful chapters in the whole book, if not terribly reassuring about how easy it is. These are the issues that cause a considerable concern prior to the birth of a baby and justifiably have a prominent place in this book. Common pitfalls are highlighted but they are also the ones likely to be out of

date most quickly and so all the relevant pay/charges/fees/discounts would need to be checked out anyway.

Pregnant women appear to attract stories of terrible pregnancies and childbirth and unfortunately this book is no different. However there is much practical advice here hidden amongst the stories of women giving birth, both good and bad. Working fathers have a chapter of their own but there is not much more than an acknowledgement that fathers want to spend time with their children as well as work. The author concedes in the final chapters that once you have taken the plunge into family life things become more, rather than less, complicated. The vignettes are useful in giving examples of the decisions other families have made.

She finishes with a collection of quotes from women working in other professions explaining the challenges of other demanding jobs such as law and banking. It is intended to make us feel better about the decision to have children as, in the end, it could be worse.

Highlights & reservations

The main strengths of this book are the well laid out practical sections and the pithy writing style. The chapters are short, relevant and don't overwhelm you with information. The use of quotes adds humour and depth and highlights the wealth of support and information available from colleagues in similar situations. The chapters are so short, in fact, that they lend themselves perfectly to reading.

The sections on employment law, NHS policies on working arrangements and financial matters are particularly useful even for those already with children. The FAQ section stands up well on it's own and something similar could be considered as a useful addition to the literature sent out by NHS employers to prospective parents. After two children while working as a trainee during periods of maternity leave, research and out of programme, I thought I was aware of most of the issues relevant to me. However I was happy to be proven wrong and am now making the most of my free dental care!

The author concentrates on the planning and achievement of a successful pregnancy whilst working in the NHS and thus dwells on the short but stressful beginnings to parenthood. In reality parenthood (in general) happens to two parents and children hang around a lot longer than just a year or so. Those looking for help in dealing with the stresses of everyday motherhood beyond the first year may be disappointed that discussion of these issues only really begins in the final few chapters.

The vignettes and quotes were usually positive but did highlight a number of negative attitudes as well as the apparent mis-apprehensions and mis-trust that female doctors have had to overcome. If one was to take these as an accurate representation of current working life in the NHS then they could be rather off-putting to a prospective parent. They certainly left me feeling less than positive about working and parenthood and would usually be the kind of comment that as a parent I would ignore. The final chapter describing the

lives of parents in other, probably equivalent, jobs means to suggest that as doctors as well as parents we are in a rather privileged position. It just goes to show that being a parent can be difficult and stressful no matter what job we do.

Summary

If you are looking for that elusive pearl of wisdom that will tell you how to achieve the optimum work-life balance you are unlikely to find it here (unless that is the recommendation to get a live-in nanny!). However if you are looking for a short book with some practical advice and acknowledgement that you are not on your own when feeling concerned for you/your child's future then this may be the book for you.

Dr Mary O'Driscoll
Specialist Registrar in Clinical Genetics
Reviewed in November 2009.