

Inspiring Doctors. Episode 0: Extraordinary communicators

Welcome to *Inspiring doctors*, a podcast series brought to you by the British Medical Association. I'm Martin McKee, professor of public health and the president of the BMA.

In this series, I will be joined by people who I see as role models. While most doctors speak to the public in individual consultations every day, these people have successfully taken their medical knowledge to a wider audience in creative ways, using national newspapers, television, books, podcasts, social media, graphic novels, poetry and more.

But I don't just want to talk about their work and the legacies that they are leaving. In these podcasts I want to get to the heart of what drives them. I will be asking my interviewees about the inspirations behind their work – the people, the places and the experiences that formed their ambitions, ideals and practices. We will talk about the lessons they learned, and the advice they have for young doctors who may want to follow in their footsteps.

I'm recording these podcasts after three years in which our worlds were turned upside down. Sometimes it seemed like everything we knew and cherished had disappeared or changed. We have been through a pandemic, the likes of which the world has not seen for over a century. Millions lost their lives, and many others have been orphaned or disabled, with large numbers still afflicted by Long COVID or exhausted from burnout.

Yet, things could have been much worse. The COVID-19 pandemic was a scientific success. Scientists worked round the clock to understand, track, and respond to a virus that was spreading rapidly across the world. During these darkest of times doctors, and other scientific professionals, were the people capable of answering the questions we desperately needed answering. They solved riddles and they found solutions. They brought together academia and technology to combat fear and isolation.

But we, as a society, often also called upon doctors to be the communicators during the pandemic. Many were required to move away from the established, safe, routine of peer-reviewed journals and academic debate and speak directly to colleagues and the public. They were the voices of reason away from the political circus – the rational guides for an anxious public.

It shouldn't have been a surprise. We know that the public want to know more about science, and especially medicine: Medical books are often among the best sellers; Television programmes attract very large audiences; The daily briefings by Chris Whitty and his colleagues were viewed by millions. And, not on the same scale of course, but tens of thousands followed the weekly briefings that myself and colleagues on Independent SAGE provided, where we asked the public about their concerns and tried to respond in ways that were understandable.

What this experience has taught us most keenly is that communication can make a huge difference. But it isn't a skill everyone possesses – especially when it involves complex issues. Training, for example in media skills, can help, but it is often defensive, designed to reduce the risk of making mistakes. And the mass media are only one of many outlets that can be used to explain what is important. Something that has become clear to me is that some people are just extraordinary communicators – through some gift of nature or nurture they can educate, inform and delight in ways many of us only dream of.

Throughout history, some doctors have done exactly that – communicating with reach well beyond medical and scientific audiences. A few wrote extensively on philosophy while continuing to practise medicine. One was the Jewish scholar Maimonides, born in Cordoba in 1138 and who would become physician to Saladin. Another was John Locke, who would subsequently be known as the 'father of liberalism'. Others left the profession soon after completing their studies, finding fame in other directions, like the poet John Keats and the playwright Somerset Maugham.

Others stayed in medicine, at least for a while, and drew on their clinical experiences in their writing. Anton Chekhov turned to writing to make ends meet as he earned so little from caring for the poor. Arthur Conan Doyle was another doctor who could draw on a wide range of experiences. His iconic character Sherlock Holmes was, in part, modelled on his surgical teacher from Edinburgh, Joseph Bell. The detective's methods involved the skills of observation and inquiry used in diagnosis. And, of course, Holmes, was accompanied on his adventures by a physician, Dr John Watson.

Conan Doyle's contemporary, Scottish doctor and writer Margaret Todd, drew on her experiences at the Edinburgh School of Medicine for Women to write her acclaimed debut novel *Mona Maclean, Medical Student*, which explored women's roles in the medical profession. She wrote six novels and a number of short stories, as well as the book *The Life of Dr Sophia Jex-Blake*, which described the fight of women to enter the medical profession in the 19th century.

More contemporary examples of masters of medicine and communication include Siddhartha Mukherjee, an oncologist and author of Pulitzer prize-winning book *The Emperor of All Maladies: A Biography of Cancer*; and Atul Gawande, a surgeon who became a staff writer for the *New Yorker* soon after starting his residency. His work comparing the costs and quality of healthcare in neighbouring towns – and the damage caused by the corporate capture of American medicine – is credited with strengthening Barack Obama's commitment to health care reform.

In the UK, we witnessed relatively recently the great impact of a colleague with medical understanding and a natural skill for communication. Kate Granger, a geriatrician, was diagnosed in her late 20s with a sarcoma that would eventually kill her. She launched the #hellomynameis campaign in response to a doctor telling her that her cancer had spread, but in an off-hand way – and it has now been adopted throughout the NHS.

There is something magical about the confluence of medicine and communication. It is an alchemy which can produce genuine inspiration. The examples I've given and the interviewees on this podcast are just some among the many doctors who have done this. There are also many more whose names and opportunities have been lost due to bias, prejudice, and discrimination. And there are also a great many who are yet to get started.

In this podcast I will speak to doctors and others closely linked to medicine here in the United Kingdom. They are a selection of role models who have inspired me. I hope that our conversations will, in turn, inspire you.

This podcast is hosted by Martin McKee, produced and edited by Alex Cauvi. For more information visit bma.org.uk/inspiringdoctors