

MEDICINE AT TRINITY 1972-2012: A FATHER-SON STORY

Paul Stewart & Rory Stewart

DR. PAUL STEWART

1972

Paul Stewart graduated from Trinity College with a degree in Medicine in 1979. He trained as a General Practitioner in Northern Ireland before moving to Donegal in 1983 where he has been practicing as a GP for the last 27 years.

Why Medicine?

I well remember making the decision at the age of 16, after reading a Pelican paperback on a Career in Medicine written by a Professor working in London. He strongly recommended Medicine as providing a great mixture of clinical work, research and teaching. I also wanted to do something useful and in those days, like now, it was important to study something with the probability of a job at the end of it.

Why Trinity?

I had a choice of Queens or Trinity but in the Belfast of 1972 there was only one choice away from “the Troubles” and away from home, always a good idea at third level.

What was needed to get in?

Back in 1972, as a student coming from the North with A Levels, the requirement was to take three science Cs for Pre-Med entry or a B and two Cs to skip Pre-Med and go straight into First Med. I took the second option and spent the extra year doing a B. Mod Physiology after Second Med.

The First Week

Fresher’s Week was a real eye opener with all the societies in front square-including the Pipe Smoking Society and the Tidily Winks Club!

We were welcomed to the School of Medicine by the then Dean Prof. James McCormack with a wonderful speech stressing the importance of community, service and scientific questioning. Then, like today, the Anatomy Department in first year was a rite of passage for all medical students. The department was full of great characters like Prof. Erskine, Dr Weeks and the technicians Gerard and “I only know about the soft parts” Edward.

I spent the first year in Trinity hall (T hall) out in Dartry with most of the Northern crowd or ‘Norenors’ as we were known. At that time, Trinity had a wise policy of insisting that first year students either stayed in digs, rooms or T hall rather than independently in what were then called flats (now apartments).

Teaching

Teaching in first and second year was much the same as it is today with dissecting, lab work and large lectures, which we then shared with Dental students. Every Monday involved “a Spot” or continual assessment test. This meant that we had to study all weekend and Monday was our night on the town, which started off in the Lincoln Inn (The Meds Pub) at back gate and finished off in the Long Hall, Great Georges Street before taking the No 14 bus back out to Dartry. One of the consequences of continual assessment was that I had passed Anatomy by Easter so the anatomy of the arm and leg has always been a bit of a mystery to me.

Socialising

Apart from the Lincoln, the other Trinity College watering hole was the BATTERY. The Pavilion (The Pav) only opened up in the mid 70s and at this time it was only open in the summer term. Most days there was a lunch-time concert in the J.C.R. with a local band performing, usually “The Rats”. It was only when they moved to London did we realise what we were missing and the rest is history as they say.

The Dublin Bombings

My first year ended very badly. We were at a late evening grind in Histology with Dr Tuffery (still there I believe) when we heard a loud explosion. Having been brought up in Belfast through the early 70s, I immediately recognised the noise as a bomb. We all ran out of the side gate onto Nassau Street where we were met by a truly apocalyptic scene. The remains of a small sports car were on fire in the middle of the street with a number of victims being attended to by passersby. I vividly remember feeling useless as a first year medical student and made up my mind to do a first aid course as soon as possible.

Rooms in College

Because the medical degree was six years, twice as long as an arts degree, we got to stay in rooms for two years. It was right in the centre of Dublin and we had a ‘skip’ to get us out of bed and tidy our room every morning, it didn’t get any better. We also had free entry to the Trinity ball for our mates and ourselves.

Hospitals

Back in 1975, we were allowed to pick our Federated hospital. This was in the pre Tallaght days. The hospitals included Dr Steevens, St. James’s, the Meath, Paddy Dun’s, the Adelaide and Mercers or ‘Messers’, as it was known. I choose the later. Mercers is now the Primary Care Surgery and Department of General Practice RCSI at the top of Grafton Street, but in my day it was a small friendly hospital full of great characters. The surgeons were Prof. Cooligan, Mr. Matthews and Mr. Brennan, while the physicians included Dr Peter Daly and Prof. Lyons. We had a great Medical Registrar for finals called Shane O’Neill. Mercers was the sort of hospital that took in ‘old ones’ who lived alone over Christmas. On Saturday nights, after a few pints in Peter’s Pub across from Mercers, we used to cycle up to Dr Steevens and get in a bit of practice stitching up the drunks.

General Practice Rotation

We did five days of GP attachments in five different practices around Dublin in fourth Med. I have very fond memories of spending a day with Mane Berber out in Churchtown and being very impressed at a senior Doctor who took the trouble to syringe out the wax from an elderly patient’s ears. I also remember another GP, Dr Angus O’Rourke, who told us that when he was in final Med they had four tutorials on Coarctation of the Aorta and it was ten years in General Practice before he came across a case, and he missed it! It was experiences like these that got me thinking about a career in General Practice.

In Conclusion

Looking back over the years now, what I enjoyed most while at Trinity were the great friends I made and what I appreciated most were the teachers who encouraged me to question what we read and to empathise with my patients but most of all to listen to them.

RORY STEWART

2012

Rory Stewart is a 4th year Medical Student from Donegal and son of Doctor Paul Stewart. He entered Medicine as a Mature Student in 2006 and is hoping to graduate as part of the class of 2012.

Getting in

Like many of my fellow classmates I was forced to take the ‘scenic route’ into Medicine. I studied for my leaving certificate in 2000-2002. Aside from study I had a penchant for sport, socialising, art and many other extracurricular activities, which may not have been conducive to achieving the fantastical points required for entry into Medicine. So when results day arrived I wasn’t overly surprised to find I had done extremely poorly. So poorly in fact that I received no first round offers, and it took until the third round to furnish me with any options at all. It was at this point the University of Ulster; Jordanstown offered me a place on their Applied Psychology programme. I spent four years studying psychology in Belfast, which included a yearlong clinical placement in psychiatry and an additional 6 months of work at the same facility.

During that time I reapplied to Medicine twice. I had explored the avenues of both the UK and Ireland and had expanded my search to include

Graduate Entry Programmes and Medical Schools in Prague and Budapest. At one stage I even considered going to Grenada to get my Medical Education.

After three failed attempts to be admitted to Medicine I made the tough decision to go back to school to repeat my Leaving Certificate. Not unique in this regard, a quick survey of my class would suggest that almost one third of the Irish students have repeated. However, going back to school in your twenties after four years of university is a very different animal to repeating at eighteen.

During this year I worked hard on building my CV, taking night classes in physiology and anatomy while studying for the leaving cert. On top of this, I was studying for the GAMSAT exam for Graduate Entry Medicine, the HPAT aptitude test, exams for entry to medical school abroad while preparing for a lot of interviews that were to follow. One of these interviews was for the mature entry programme at Trinity College.

I had heard that Trinity was somewhat unique in opting not to adopt a Graduate Entry Programme, but instead reserved a small number of places for dedicated mature applicants. Despite the fact that the applications were hugely competitive, I decided to throw my hat in the ring. Having interviewed well at Aberdeen and Norwich during the previous month I was confident that I knew what to expect. I didn't!

On entering the interview room a wave of insecurity broke over me. Past deans peered at me from their huge gilded portraits, and across a fifteen-foot mahogany table there was a seven-strong panel of interviewers. The only time I had encountered something similar in the past was being brought in front of the school disciplinary board in Castleknock College and as I recall, that incident did not end well! Regardless, in an obvious attempt to put me at ease, Prof. McCann opened with what he must have perceived as an easy question: "What do you know about the campus here in Trinity?" All I knew was that I had been sneaking into the library with a friend's student card to study and that I sauntered down to the Pav most Fridays for a couple of ales. In blind panic I settled for the latter. The interview panel chuckled and from then on the interview went well.

Three weeks later, standing on Leeson Street, I received a phone call from the Medical School Office. Like a movie cliché I dropped to my knees. Seven years was all it took for me to get in!

In the Beginning

To ease us back into university life Trinity puts on a mature student week before the other students arrive, a chance to familiarise oneself with the computer systems and the libraries. It was at one of the computer tutorials (where some budding Bill Gates groans at having to explain to you the difference between your username and password) that I met my first friends of this new chapter in my life. I heard them before I could see them and as I rose

from my seat I was greeted by two hysterical girls delighted to have found the mysterious 'other mature med student'. Admittedly, I was completely taken aback by such friendliness having just come from Belfast where I struggled to recall the names of more than a half dozen classmates with whom I spent four long years. Later that evening, we met for a few drinks in the Lincoln Inn and we have remained friends ever since.

On the first day of lectures we all assembled in the Hamilton building for the inspiring "Welcome to Trinity Medicine, you guys are the best of the best, the future of medicine" speeches. Everyone was standing around nervously, doing their best to look cool and aloof while trying to make eye contact in an attempt to initiate a conversation and possibly make a friend! At the time, one of the maxims my father gave to me from his time in Trinity was echoing in my head: "Remember you'll spend the first day of medical school trying to make friends and the next five years trying to get rid of them."

We settled into the lecture theatre to be greeted by what seemed like every single academic in the University. Prof. McCann finished his speech by telling us how he had met his wife at medical school, as had many of his colleagues – so we should take a good look at the person to our left and our right as they could well become our future partner. Boxed in by two burly men I thought to myself that this Prof. was not so wise when it comes to matters of matchmaking! However four years on it is interesting to notice how many couples have grown out of the class.

Studying Medicine is full of memorable firsts; your first day, the first time you interview a patient, the first time you draw blood or insert a catheter. In particular my first visit to the anatomy theatre stands out. Here medicine became real. No longer was it size 12 font with the occasional gory picture. These were human beings, albeit dead ones, up close and personal.

“Welcome to Trinity Medicine; you guys are the best of the best, the future of medicine”

The Anatomy building has an immense sense of historical significance; you feel that by just being there that you are somehow part of Trinity folklore. On entering the dissection room you are overwhelmed by the smell of formaldehyde, a smell that I have never become accustomed to. When we were brought to meet our cadaver many of my fellow students appeared uneasy. My own thoughts were on a conversation I had had with my mother just before my interviews. She told me that she would donate her body as a cadaver to any Medical School that would take me, on condition she could keep her favourite red shoes on! She had suggested if things were going badly in any of the interviews that I pull this ace out of my sleeve in a last gasp attempt to swing the interview in my favour. Luckily things never came to that. However, when confronted by the draped cadaver I couldn't help but wonder if under the sheet would be a pair of patent red shoes! We spent the next two or so hours methodically dissecting out an arm and asking the demonstrators, “What's this? What's that?” to be repeatedly told “Fascia!”

I was struck by the ethnic diversity within the class. Coming from the University of Ulster where diversity extended to someone from ‘down south’, this was completely different. With Irish, Northern Irish, English, Malaysians, Middle Easterns, Swedes, Portuguese, Canadians, Americans, a Slovenian, even someone from Cork, it really was a culture soup, and all the more interesting for it.

While the days were still long enough and warm enough we spent many of the evenings in the first weeks outside the Pav. Trinity is a university built on tradition and there are few traditions more ingrained in the class than going to the Pav after a mentally taxing day of

lectures to erase some of the hard learned facts of the day. I would imagine that hazy memories of long warm evenings basking in the sun in front of the Pav with a cool can of one's favourite beverage will live in the memory long after the biochemistry of the *Krebs Cycle* has faded to black.

Socialising

It's All About Balls.

In first year, I was struck by how many formal social events appear on the Trinity ENTS calendar: Arts Ball, Hall Ball, Bess Ball, MOVE Ball, Inaugural Ball, Med Ball and of course the Legendary Trinity Ball. As a result, I decided it would be prudent to buy a tux; it was the best investment I ever made. There is occasion to dust off the tux on a monthly basis in Trinity if you wish. In this the year of our Tercentenary, there certainly are several more occasions that could be added to the list.

For medics, Med Ball is the highlight of the social calendar. It might have been appropriate for Prof. McCann to mention at our introductory lecture that we should beware of Med Ball; you may meet your future significant other there!

Trinity Ball is now a huge festival of music sold as the biggest private party in Europe. On entering campus one is greeted by a wave of music and an eye-popping spectacle of flashing lights, tents, bars and ‘stocious’ students rolling around the cobbles. The sheer size of the crowds makes it difficult to see everything and you inevitably can't keep track of friends and end up making new ones! All part of what makes Trinity ball so special.



Pre-Clinical Years

My pre-clinical years or, more accurately, my survival years encompassed all facets of Pathology, Microbiology, Pharmacology, Anatomy, Biochemistry and Physiology. I call them the survival years as we spent each of the first three years being told that should we survive until next year we would be home and dry. I'm astounded by how much I covered in those years and even more astounded by how much I've since forgotten. For me the pre-clinical years were about getting by. My father would always say, "*the bright sparks always burn out; you want to be the guy with the ball who gets carried over in the scrum*".

Until recently, biochemistry was a complete mystery to me. I remember spending a whole day in first year memorising the *Michaelis-Menten* model of enzyme kinetics while not having the faintest idea what it meant. In truth, I only passed the final exam by virtue of seven intense fifteen minute grinds over coffee with a friend who has a knack for all things science. Forever in his debt, he managed to simplify complex topics such as bio-genetics into a series of basic shapes and arrows enough to gain a solid 51% in the Biochemistry final at the end of second med.

Exams

I have often felt that education is ruined by exams and that there is really nothing I hate more than being assessed. Strange when you consider that by the time I'm finished my 'scenic route', I will have been in education for well over 20 years and sat more exams than most! However, they are a necessary evil and a significant part of life in Trinity Medical School.



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In my opinion medical students can be subdivided into 3 types: '*the machine*', '*the slow plodder*' and '*the frantic last minute crammer*'. I believe the majority of us fall into the latter category, myself included.

The '*machine*' can be described as academically gifted, highly motivated, incredibly focused, ruthless and driven by one goal: to be better than everyone else. The '*slow plodder*' on the other hand is clever, clever enough to get themselves to the library every afternoon for an hour and stoically chip away at the vast expanse of course material. The '*frantic last minute crammer*' starts each term with good intentions of keeping on top of the work but is quickly distracted by the bright lights of the city, parties, and social engagements.

When exams approach, each type proceeds in a particular manner. When '*frantic last minute crammer*' has an earth shattering realisation that they have their pathology final in ten days and that memorising '*Kumar and Clark*' in its entirety is now somewhat ambitious, they enter isolation mode. Isolation mode is similar to the default setting of '*the machine*'. Not unlike the machine, the crammer adopts an incredible clarity of focus, albeit with a slightly

less ambitious goal: to pass the exams. While in isolation, energy drinks, Berocca and high carb pre-prepared foods from the local convenience store sustain the crammer for up to 15 hours a day in the library writing and rewriting lists in a vain hope that condensing the information will make it easier to learn.

During this time, the '*frantic last minute crammer*' goes through something similar to *Kubler and Ross's* stages of dealing with grief. First, denial: you deny the exam is actually happening and put off thinking about it. Then, anger: everyone in the library is so loud and annoying, everything goes wrong, the library toilets are a disgrace and people are just so bloody rude! Then, bargaining: begin the day with the plan to do ten hours study; end up saying if you learn a particular set of five topics, that it should be enough to pass the exam, even though there are six questions on the paper. Then, depression: that horrible moment where everything seems black, you can't stomach getting out of bed to go to the library, you're going to fail anyway, maybe medicine wasn't for you. And finally you reach acceptance: the exam is in two days, whether you like it or not you simply have to sit down and study or you'll be out on your ear. If you aren't the '*frantic last minute crammer*' you'll spot him on the day of the exam. By then he is broken, only kept upright by a cocktail of Red Bull, quadruple espresso, Proplus and Lucozade (or their cheap equivalents). Zombielike, incapable of conversation, a simple "*Good morning, how are you set for the exam?*" will be greeted by a recitation of the carpal bones or 26 side effects of lithium toxicity! At this point the '*frantic last minute crammer*' has caught up to the rest of the pack on the home straight, all that is left is to see if he can hold on (stay awake) till the finish. I have seen fellow students set alarms and take tactical naps mid-exam in an attempt to pull through. The '*frantic last minute crammer*' is not a myth, he exists, I've seen him.

Despite the intensity of studying for written exams, nothing instils more fear in medical students than OSCEs and viva exams. I think

when confronted with a written exam medical students feel they can hide behind the paper, put down what they know without having to worry about further questions exposing their relative lack of depth of knowledge. In written papers, no one is watching you think while you are trying to construct a well worded paragraph of information out of two miserly facts. I recall sitting on the '*anatomy bus*'; a series of rows of chairs lined up in the layout of a bus waiting to enter the dissecting room where one of the lecturers would be waiting to dissect what you had and hadn't learned during the year. A bell would ring every fifteen minutes and you would move one row closer to the chopping board. Rumours would circulate that certain seats equated to getting certain lecturers and that everyone who had ended up with a particular lecturer had failed and left in tears. With the last name 'Stewart', I was left waiting in the 'holding room' for most of the day. By the time my turn came, I was wound as tight as a drum. In the end Prof. Glacken steered me through the viva with ease. He has a knack for making you feel clever even when you are getting things wrong. While scary, these things never seem to go as badly as you imagine.

In Conclusion

For me, life in its most simple form is a medley of relationships; relationships with friends, family, colleagues, and even with institutions. It is these relationships that form our perspectives on life and define how we approach life on a daily basis. My relationship with Trinity Medical School has been a good one; one that will fundamentally change how I see and embrace the world in the future. The chapter of my life spent as a student at Trinity College has been a significant experience; an experience that defines me as a person and one that I am proud to be defined by.