

Medicine, my eating disorder and me

My name is Anna, and I am a final-year medical student. I also have an eating disorder – which I have had since adolescence.

I decided I wanted to study medicine five years ago. I can't say exactly what prompted that decision, but I suspect that my experience of illness had a lot to do with it.

When I was sixteen, I spent several weeks on a children's ward. I was depressed. I had been caught in a cycle of bulimia and self-harm for two years, and was awaiting transfer to an adolescent unit. Those weeks were some of the unhappiest of my life. Every morning I would watch the doctors on their ward round. Every morning, they would reach my bed – and walk right past it. 'Psych case', they would mutter. I would watch as they spoke to young children with such ease – but not to me. Occasionally they would ask my parents how I was feeling – but not me.

I felt so angry. Why did children with physical problems receive attention and sympathy, when I – a mentally unwell child - was labelled as 'deviant' and ignored? How could healthcare professionals provide so little in the way of psychological care?

I believe that such negative experiences in adolescence fuelled my later passion to become a 'good doctor'.

When I said that I wanted to be a doctor, I received mixed responses. Some, including members of my family, supported me all the way. Others – predominantly teachers and healthcare professionals – were extremely cautious.

I was asked by one teacher, 'Would you honestly want to be treated by a doctor with *your* issues?'

Others were concerned that the high levels of stress involved when training to be a doctor would cause me to relapse.

Indeed, medicine is a very tough degree – academically, emotionally and physically. It is also a wonderful experience, and a privilege.

At times I have considered giving up, and have cried because I felt too exhausted to continue. Although I consider myself to be 'in recovery', I am still affected by my eating disorder on a daily basis.

I've found ways to cope: I plan my meals every day, I keep snacks with me to make sure I don't get hungry, and I try to eat with other people to distract me from the uncomfortable thoughts and feelings I have around meal times. I see a counsellor at the medical school every week – which has been vital to me at times. I have access to a psychiatrist who oversees my medication, and I have a key worker at my local CMHT who oversees my care and helps me with practical issues – such as time management and finding ways to relax and cope with stress.

My tutors and the medical school know about my eating disorder. Although you have a right to confidentiality, it is far better to disclose your eating disorder to the University or Occupational Health services. It shows that you have insight and maturity - and it will give your University the chance to provide you with any additional support you may need.

Medicine is by no means for everyone – and shouldn't be undertaken lightly. However, having an eating disorder should not prevent anyone from applying to medical school, or from being a very

successful student once there.

My main advice for anyone with an eating disorder considering medicine as a career is to be honest. Be honest with yourself, and with other people. Seek support early – most Universities should have a Counselling Service, or Disability Co-ordinator to advise you if necessary. Make sure you register with a local GP and, if necessary, ask for a referral to a psychiatrist or local eating disorder service. I have got to the stage I am at now not purely through my own strength, but with the help of the University, mental health professionals, friends and family – who in their different ways have carried me along the way.

Choosing medicine was the greatest decision I ever made. Despite all of the ups and downs, the tears and the exhaustion, it has given me huge confidence in myself and my ability to help other people. As I continue to strive to be a 'good doctor', my need for my eating disorder is slowly diminishing – and I have never felt in a stronger position to fight it than I do now.

Anna Mead-Robson