

When I was in high school, I got very worried when getting asked what I wanted to do as my “next step”, because the truth was, I didn’t really know. I had ideas and possibilities about what I might like to do, but I didn’t have a definite decision at the time. I was scared that I’d make the wrong decision.

I knew I wanted to keep learning, and that I still wanted more options. I chose to study First Year Health Science at Otago, because not only is it a pathway into five different health professional training courses, it forms a solid foundation for a number of science degrees. So, options. At the end of the year, I accepted an offer to study medicine, because not only did I like the idea of a career with a practical problem-solving component, medicine included a lot of subspecialties. So once again, options.

Fast forward 5 more years. It’s November 2017. I’m a freshly minted junior doctor in the hospital. I’m working in surgery, but from my point of view, it means that I mostly manage the patients on the ward. Day two on the job - I get a call from one of the doctors higher up on the totem pole than me. She informs me that she got a call from the nurses about a surgical patient on one of the wards. The patient is looking really unwell, but she’s stuck in clinic and can’t get over right away. Could please I pop in, see what’s going on and keep things ticking along until she gets over? Okay, I can do this. Sounds pretty standard. I’m walking on over and as I’m walking, I think about possibilities as to what’s going on. I get to the patient’s bed space. There’s a small crowd of nurses moving around his bed space. He looks a lot more unwell than I’d expected. One of the nurses looks up and says "Ah, good, the doctor’s here". Relief washes over me. Thank goodness, my senior has made it out of clinic. I look behind me, but there's no one there. The doctor the nurse is talking about is me. *I am the doctor.*

I’d like to take this moment to talk about imposter syndrome. Imposter syndrome is a pattern of thinking where you doubt your own accomplishments and have a fear of being exposed as a fraud. This persists despite other evidence supporting your competence, and you end up attributing your success down to luck or having somehow tricked other people into thinking that you are smarter than you actually are. It’s a phenomenon, and not a mental disorder - but that doesn’t mean that it can’t affect you strongly. Various studies suggest that up to 70% of people have experienced imposter syndrome at some point in their lives.

So how do we deal with imposter syndrome? Early researchers that documented imposter syndrome proposed a group-therapy style support setting where people living with imposter syndrome meet with other people also being affected. The researchers suggested that the realisation that they were not alone significantly benefited participants. Another technique covered was having the participants re-frame common negative thoughts and ideas. For example, changing “I will probably fail this exam” to “I will do my best on this exam”, or “I haven’t done this in the same way as other people” to “I am my own person and will figure out my own path”. More recent studies also emphasize the benefit from mentorship programs for those that are new to a particular step in their study or their careers. Having a mentor who has been in the program will help the new students or employees feel supported. This allows for a much smoother and less overwhelming transition.

As health professionals, we are encouraged to debrief about difficult situations with our colleagues – both peers and seniors. When we reflect on things, it’s not just an opportunity to think about what you could have done differently next time. It also helps you come to terms with and process what has happened.

I like to think that since November 2017, I have become more comfortable with the idea that I'm a doctor. I love my job, and every day I continue to learn.. Despite feeling unprepared and quite alone in that moment, my senior did make it from clinic to help, and the patient was okay. This represents two very important lessons that I have learnt – that firstly, I need to give myself credit for the work I have done to get where I am, and that secondly, there are always other people around who are able to provide help and support.

There's a saying that goes "How do you eat an elephant? One bite at a time". When the task at hand seems too much, I want you all to remind yourself: You are the doctor. You are the student, the athlete, the musician, the learner. Whoever you are, I want you to give yourself credit for what you have achieved. You are not alone. There are other people who have done this before you, others doing this alongside you, and other people who will come after you. You don't have to make the perfect decision and know everything right away, it's enough to simply try your best to make the best decision you can, and take things bite by bite. So, pick up your utensils, and tuck in.

Thank you