

Why do We Want to be What We Want to Be? - Sample Chapter

Though I cannot pinpoint exactly when I made up my mind to study medicine, the decision came quite early in my life.

The question that one may want to ask me then is: 'Why did you aspire to become a doctor? One might have expected you to follow in the footsteps of your parents and choose to become a peasant farmer.'

While not wanting to demean the trade of my parents, I wish to point out that tilling the land with primitive instruments under the scorching African sun was not their profession of choice. As I have already mentioned, both my parents were desirous of attending school. Circumstances beyond their control prevented them from doing so. Outspoken as she was on matters relating to justice and equal rights, mother, given the chance, would probably have ended up as a politician fighting for the rights of women.

With his sharp mind (he learnt the English and Twi alphabets on his own and through his own perseverance learnt to read), father, on his part, given the opportunity, could have achieved a high position on the academic ladder of his choice.

Having been given the opportunity my parents were deprived of, it is perhaps not surprising that their children should aim higher and, indeed, take advantage of the opportunity offered them to strive to progress further in life.

On the issue of my decision to become a doctor and not for example an engineer or architect, I can say that it was based mainly on my desire to help improve the lot of the local population, in particular, and the country at large in the area of health care.

Several factors, both personal and non-personal, shaped my decision. I will cite the non-personal factors to begin with.

The widespread poverty of the inhabitants, combined with the fact that the nearest hospital was quite a distance from our village, led to the situation whereby the sick were usually kept in the village until the condition they were afflicted with reached advanced stages before efforts were undertaken to take them to hospital – in some cases it turned out too late for them to be helped.

When at long last extended family members managed to gather sufficient funds to enable the sick to be sent to hospital, the means of transport became an issue. The village happened to be located on a road linking two district capitals. Every morning about half a dozen vehicles travelling in both directions passed by. Often there were no seats or only a couple of seats left by the time they got to the village.

Though the general situation influenced my decision to study medicine, a few specific instances helped sharpen my decision further. One day, as we walked home from school, four people carrying someone on a makeshift stretcher emerged from a bush path that linked some of the surrounding farmlands to the main road. As we learnt from them, the man they were carrying had been bitten by a snake whilst working on his farm about one kilometre away. After tying a rope some distance to the affected site on his left leg as a tourniquet, they decided to carry him to the main road in the hope that they would find a vehicle that would transport the injured man to the hospital about 30 kilometres away. Our ways parted, for we were heading in different directions. To this day I have wondered whether he ever made it to hospital. And if he did, was it too late for the doctors to save him?

Once a young resident of the village, a girl aged about ten years, sustained a deep machete wound to her right thigh whilst helping her parents at home! As blood oozed profusely from her blood vessels, the alarmed villagers instinctively tied a cord firmly above the wound

in a desperate attempt to stop or at least to minimise the loss of blood. After waiting a few hours for the means of transport to take her to hospital, a vehicle eventually turned up. Happily, in the end, she was saved.

Then there was the case of Manu, my younger sister, who nearly succumbed to an attack of measles. For a while, due to lack of funds, my parents were unable to send her to hospital. In the meantime she became so emaciated, she looked literally like a living skeleton. In the end my parents managed to raise a loan to bring her to the attention of the doctors. The fact that she survived, for me, was miraculous.

A detailed account of all the medical crises, emergencies and problems I witnessed in and around our little settlement at the time I was growing up there would fill a large book. Before I proceed to another topic, however, I would like to tell readers about one scary incident that involved my mother.

Though she was not feeling well one day, the need to replenish the depleted food store of the family led to her decision to visit one of our farms to harvest foodstuff for the family. I was about ten years old at the time and was the only person who accompanied her on that occasion. In the course of our walk back home from the farm, her condition deteriorated to the point that I feared she would collapse in front of me. That she managed to make it home, still carrying on her head the load of food provisions she had fetched, is a real marvel. Just as she reached the perimeters of the compound of our home, she collapsed and fainted.

It took a while before we could find a vehicle to convey her to the hospital. Fortunately she made a complete recovery. Added to the non-personal factors outlined above was my personal suffering with my left ankle. During the first two years of my affliction, I was subjected to a catalogue of horrible treatment 'remedies' from one traditional healer after the other. Despite the torture, no one could tell me exactly what the cause of my affliction was. In the end I firmly made up my mind to become a doctor, not only to help others, but also to understand what was behind the problem that had caused me so much suffering and misery.