



CAREERS

Chris Oliver: from orthopaedic surgeon to fitness professor

The retired trauma orthopaedic surgeon and honorary professor of physical activity for health recommends grabbing every opportunity that comes your way

Adrian O'Dowd

BMJ Careers

Dared into medicine

As a young man, I was doing sprint and kayaking at national level and everyone said I was going to go to the Olympics. But my mother said you can't make a career out of kayaking, and she dared me to be a doctor. It was all unexpected and not terribly well planned.

Choosing the right speciality

I thought I'd do surgery because of the practical aspect of repairing things. I realised I didn't want to do bowel or cancer surgery. Then I did neurosurgery and I enjoyed that, but there was so much death and paralysis. I decided I wanted to do orthopaedics because you can put things back together and fix things, and I ended up doing orthopaedic trauma.

Moving around

During my elective period I went to Cebu in the Philippines to learn about tropical diseases, then to Belfast to do plastic surgery, and then the National Heart Hospital in London to learn some cardiology and medicine. I got a job working in York, Leeds, and Harrogate, and then I did a MD in Middlesbrough on spinal muscle physiology. I went to the Robert Jones and Agnes Hunt Orthopaedic Hospital in Oswestry where I worked with James Richardson—who was a terrific mentor. He really supported me and my research, and helped launch my career.

Health informatics

I came to the Royal Infirmary in Edinburgh in 1997 and ended up working with the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh. We set up a masters programme in healthcare informatics which was world leading in its idea of helping doctors, surgeons, and allied health professionals cope with informatics. I'm also keen on social media. My Twitter account (@CyclingSurgeon) has 24 000 followers and that's incredibly powerful for communication.

Work-life balance

When I started to do surgery as a junior doctor, I stopped exercising. My life was all about trying to impress my peers

and my father. I got 10 degrees and did over 400 papers and presentations, but I overcooked the work-life balance. By 2006, I was 27 and a half stone and had a gastric band fitted. Then I lost more than 12 stone.

Exercise

When I had the gastric band fitted, I took time off work and I set myself the task of getting fit. Initially, I was going to aqua aerobics with old ladies and riding a bike, and then I joined an Edinburgh cycling group. I built it up and, in 2009, I did the Land's End to John O'Groats cycle. Then I cycled across America in 2013 from Los Angeles to Boston. I'd like to do more and cycle around the world. I'm not sure my wife would appreciate that.

Politics

In 2012, I became chairman of the Scottish Cyclists' Touring Club and got involved in the politics of cycling. I wrote some government policy documents on how to do active travel. We've done some fantastic projects such as the Play on Pedals project in Glasgow with Cycling UK—by the end of 2016 we had 7500 pre-school children riding bicycles. We're about to roll it out in Edinburgh and want it to be extended across the whole country eventually.

Physical activity education

In Edinburgh University we did some guerrilla lectures where we found some time on the students' timetable to talk to them about physical activity. We then got an award from the principal of the university to develop physical activity education and that is now on the curriculum. We have just started a BMedSci Intercalated in physical activity.

Advice

I've had a fantastic life as a doctor and it hasn't finished, despite retirement. Never say no to an opportunity and look after your health. I regret that I didn't carry on exercising in my youth.

Career timeline

2015 to present Honorary professor of physical activity for health, University of Edinburgh

2012-2013 Chairman, Cyclists' Touring Club Scotland

2008-2011 National chairman, Intercollegiate Committee for Basic Surgical Examinations

2006-2015 Honorary senior lecturer in orthopaedics, University of Edinburgh

2005-2006 Surgical chairman representing Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh on Scottish Intercollegiate Guidelines Network

1999-2006 Part time senior lecturer in orthopaedics, University of Edinburgh

First director, faculty of medical informatics, Royal College of Surgeons of

Edinburgh. Contributed to development of MSc in Healthcare Informatics for Royal

College Surgeons of Edinburgh

1997-2017 Consultant trauma and orthopaedic surgeon, Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh

Consultant trauma fellowship from the Oxford Trauma Unit

AOTrauma Fellowship, Seattle, USA

Doctorate of medicine thesis, University of London

1994-1996 Senior orthopaedic registrar, Oswestry and Stoke-on-Trent

1989-1992 Registrar orthopaedic and trauma rotation in York, Leeds, and Harrogate

1986-1989 Senior house officer, registrar surgical rotation at Northwick Park

MBBS London University and University College Hospital, London