From ceramics to skin: how art led to a career in dermatology

Minal Singh, consultant dermatologist and medical educationalist, talks to Helen Jones about how her love of art helped her choose her career

Helen Jones

Minal Singh describes her career in dermatology as someone else’s fault. “I completed a two week placement during medical school in Edinburgh with dermatologist John Hunter and was captivated by what he did and the way he explained the importance of skin problems,” Singh says.

Her love of art, particularly ceramics and ink drawing, also played a role in her specialty choice. “The visual nature of skin—its colours and patterns—appealed to the artist in me,” Singh says. “Furthermore, the dexterity required to surgically excise skin lesions came easily to me after the intricate hand building required in ceramics.”

She was also influenced by her Asian heritage. “I’ve grown up in a culture where problems with your skin separate you from your family and community. You can’t cure everything, but you can help people cope and give them the confidence to work through it.”

Singh combines her dermatology practice with her role in medical education. As a junior doctor she enjoyed teaching but decided to move formally into medical education to be part of decision making conversations.

“I had just returned from maternity leave when the Modernising Medical Careers debacle happened. We saw a tranche of amazing junior doctors not succeed in job applications. The system didn’t work and I said to my husband, ‘this is ridiculous’, ” Singh says.

“He asked what I was going to do about it. Gandhi said, ‘Be the change you want to see in the world,’ which is something I live by. I knew that I couldn’t improve things unless I was in the system to influence it.”

That decision drove her to take on the role of a lecturer at the University of Manchester medical school, initially developing subspecialty placements and eventually leading curriculum changes.

This was followed by a promotion to professor in medical education. “Undergraduate medicine is incredibly collaborative. It enables me to influence doctors from the day they walk into medical school and hopefully set them on a path that helps them and their patients,” she explains.

When covid-19 hit, Singh’s educational role became much more difficult. “I led the design of a new curriculum that took six years to develop and then had to turn it on its head in three months,” Singh says. “When lockdown happened, we had students in placements in Europe and we had to tell them to come home. Knowing we had young people out there to bring home safely was stressful for all the team. We now have to maintain the confidence in our students that they will become doctors, despite the interruptions, something I know that we will make happen.”

Nominated by Emma Vardy

I’ve known Minal for almost 20 years and have seen her diligence and enthusiasm get her to where she is today. She is a consultant dermatologist at Salford Royal Hospital and is a well respected member of the team. Her further skills lie in medical education. She was awarded a principal fellowship of advanced higher education followed by a chair in medical education in August. This is a huge achievement and a rarity for a woman from an ethnic minority. She holds several national positions including chair of the undergraduate education workstream for the British Association of Dermatologists.

She is an inspiration to many with an unwavering belief in the potential of each and every healthcare student and trainee.

Emma Vardy is a consultant geriatrician and honorary senior lecturer, clinical dementia lead at Salford Royal NHS Foundation Trust

Nominate a role model: to nominate someone who has been a role model during your medical career, send their name, job title, and the reason for your nomination to arimmer@bmj.com

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