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Cite this as: *BMJ* 2021;375:n2465<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n2465>

Published: 12 October 2021

WOUNDED HEALER

Clare Gerada: Leadership has no magic formula

Clare Gerada *GP partner*

I will soon become president of the Royal College of General Practitioners, only the second woman in its history to hold both the chairmanship (setting strategic direction) and the presidency (an ambassadorial role). When I qualified nearly 40 years ago, I no more expected to become president of a royal college than to become Queen of England.

From childhood, all I wanted was to be a doctor. I had no real sense of what this meant in terms of a career beyond the actual caring for patients. I certainly never planned to be a “leader.” If you’d asked the younger me, I’m not sure I’d have known what “being a leader” was, other than becoming a hospital consultant, or, like my father, a partner of a general practice. But medicine is quintessentially about leadership. Nothing compares to making decisions in the consulting room; reassuring a parent in a Friday evening surgery that their child doesn’t have meningitis; or deciding that a patient with jaw pain is really having a heart attack and needs to go to hospital—immediately.

When I was younger, leaders didn’t look like me. They weren’t female or foreign. They weren’t GPs who worked in deprived areas of south London. It wasn’t that I felt excluded from the world of leadership—I just didn’t identify with it at all, and it was part of my “unknown unknown.”

In recent years I’ve been invited to talk about my career and impart wise words to doctors, especially younger female ones, about how they can break through the glass ceiling and reach the lofty heights of authority and power. These doctors see me as someone who, given my multiple roles, must have found the magic formula or attended the right course that gave me the tools to success. Ahead of my public speaking, the organiser invariably reads out a biography. I sit and listen to this litany of roles, publications, accolades, and achievements. I blush and can’t identify this adult self—this person who has seemingly “made it”—with the child who wasn’t even trusted to be a milk monitor.

I struggle to give advice, other than to say: work hard, and choose your spouse and children well. I explain that our paths to success are unique, shaped by our upbringing, career choices, external environment, and, importantly, the ability to capitalise on opportunities sent our way, to see and take chances, to take the risk and say, “Yes, I can.” But there’s no easy route to success. It involves sacrifice, a network of friends, and, if you’re a parent, a lifetime of guilt as one juggles family and professional life.

But while my leadership journey has been long, convoluted, and extremely hard work, looking back nearly four decades on, it’s been a privilege, and I’d change nothing. I look forward to my presidency with joy.

Competing interests: See www.bmj.com/about-bmj/freelance-contributors.

Provenance and peer review: Commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

Clare Gerada is chair of Doctors in Distress and medical director of NHS Practitioner Health. Her book, *Beneath the White Coat: Doctors, their Minds and Mental Health*, is published by Routledge and can be purchased at <https://www.routledge.com/Beneath-the-White-Coat-Doctors-Their-Minds-and-Mental-Health/Gerada/p/book/9781138499737>. All royalties will be donated to Doctors in Distress.