

## How I got into - and out of - academia

*Daniel Sokol*

In 1999, as an undergraduate student in modern languages, I stumbled upon a documentary on bioethics featuring an interview with Professor Jean Bernard, a renowned and by then elderly French haematologist, bioethicist and member of the *Académie Française*. He described the remarkable changes in medicine in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, from the development of antibiotics to advancement in genetics, and the ethical issues that accompanied them. I had not, until then, appreciated the moral complexity of medicine and found it fascinating.

It was not possible at Oxford for non-medics to attend medical lectures but I was allowed to sit in on the history of medicine lectures delivered to history students. I was struck by the dubious conduct of some doctors in the past, especially during the so called 'scramble for Africa' in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when European countries occupied and colonised vast swathes of the continent.

So regular was my attendance at those lectures that one day the Director of the department approached me at the end of a lecture. I thought he was going to throw me out but instead he suggested I apply for a scholarship to study for a Master's in Medical History. All I needed to do, he said, was obtain a First Class degree.

Somehow I did, and a few months later I found myself in Green College, Oxford, studying medical history. The two high points of that year were meeting my future wife, Samantha, then a medical student and now a surgeon, and receiving a handwritten letter from Professor Jean Bernard, stressing the importance of the study of medical history (in that order of course).

It was the following year, when studying for a Master's in Medical Ethics at Imperial College London that I came to meet the genial Professor Raanan Gillon, a GP and

pioneer of medical ethics in the UK, and read his little book *Philosophical Medical Ethics*. Buried in one of the chapters was a suggestion for a thesis on truth-telling in medicine. I asked him if he would supervise a PhD in the subject. He agreed.

It was during the PhD years, spent mostly in Oxford where Samantha was completing her medical degree, that I supplemented my income by performing close-up magic in a local restaurant, and writing short pieces on medical ethics for the International Herald Tribune (since renamed the New York Times International Edition), the BBC News Online, and the British Medical Journal (BMJ).

After the completion of my PhD in 2006, I took up a 1-year lectureship in medical ethics at Keele University and then a permanent lectureship at St George's, University of London, where I taught medical students.

I loved teaching but soon grew disillusioned with other aspects of academic life. I would spend months writing journal articles that hardly anyone read. At first, this mattered little as it embellished the CV but with time it mattered more and, some time in 2007 or 2008, I distinctly remember telling myself that I would stop writing articles that no one read. The thrill of publishing in academic journals faded and I was much happier publishing a piece in the BBC, where dozens of readers might engage in correspondence, than a medical ethics journal where publication was followed by a deafening silence.

The next step in my descent into dissatisfaction was the increasingly troublesome thought that no one actually cared what I, a lowly academic, thought about this or that ethical issue. What possible difference could it make? It might, at best, generate a response from a colleague in a journal but the chances of anything I wrote making any practical difference were vanishingly small. After a few years, the whole academic endeavour seemed, to me, trivial and inconsequential. I longed for something more hands-on.

I also became bored of the never-ending cycle of setting exam questions and marking that is part and parcel of life as an academic working in a medical school.

Finally, at the time I was a member of an excellent research ethics committee full of senior doctors and lawyers. I discovered that they thought about ethical issues as carefully and astutely as I did. This again made me question my value as an academic ethicist. The most impressive member of that committee was a barrister and when a solicitor friend mentioned in passing that he could see me as a barrister that was it.

In the summer of 2009, I took the gamble. I resigned from my lectureship at St George's and became a law student. I was called to the Bar in 2011 and have practised ever since, specialising in medical law.

The academic life can be wonderful but it does not suit everybody. I write this piece in case it resonates with anyone out there who is worried about relinquishing a hard-to-get academic job for another career, or newly-minted PhDs who consider an academic post as the determinant of success. There are many alternatives and you may discover that your true talents lie elsewhere.

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