

Along with Canadian Centennial Scholarship Fund committee member Julia Montgomery, I recently met up with Katharine Elliott, a past CCSF scholarship winner, for a quick lunch and chat. As a new member of the committee myself, and about to embark on reading through the many dozens of applications for funds this year, I wanted to find out more about the students we have helped in the past. Julia promised me that meeting Katharine would be an inspiration – and I can only agree with her!

We met just inside the entrance to the Royal Free Hospital in Belsize Park, where Katharine is currently working. Visiting any NHS hospital in London is a stark reminder that having good health is a blessing – but listening to Katharine's life story, while enjoying modest croque monsieurs at a tiny local café, was an even greater reminder that helping young students to make their way in their life is important for us all.

Katharine came to the UK to study medicine in a rather circuitous way. She completed an undergraduate degree (with Distinction) at McGill University in Montreal, majoring in Microbiology and Immunology, and developed an interest in international development. She spent several years with the VSO in Zambia (where she learned to speak Cinyanja), and in Milawi (she can now speak Chichewa). On returning to Canada, she worked in immunology research for a few months before taking up an internship in Bolivia (adding Spanish to her languages), in sexual and reproductive health with Oxfam-Quebec (did I say she speaks French as well?).

What I first wanted to know was what was so attractive about studying in the UK? For Katharine, having already worked overseas, she knew she had picked up more practical and hands-on skills than many of her contemporaries. She had also picked up a dream: to become a doctor. To do this in Canada, she would have to start all over again – doing undergraduate courses she was sure she would excel in but which would add a further 3 years of study. The UK is one of the few places in the world where graduates of Biological Sciences can undertake an intensive four-year program that combines the

medical theory with self-directed study and clinical application. Needless to say, she completed her Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery degrees (MBChB) Medical Course at the University of Warwick with Honours – winning a prize for pharmacology and placing in the top 5% of her class.

Being a mature student, and with four younger siblings, Katharine knew she would be on her own financially – but was prepared to work part-time and fund herself. Even if she had stayed in Canada, where both her parents work as teachers, extra funding for mature students is hard to come by. Given that she hadn't worked in the commercial sector, she didn't have savings to help her out.



Kathryn's mature approach to why she wanted to study medicine, her incredibly high grades and recommendations from her instructors, and her experience of working in developing countries, convinced the CCSF to award Katharine scholarships in three successive years: it is a very rare achievement. But Kathryn is an amazing young woman.

Having completed her studies, she's currently 1 year into her 2-year Foundation Programme and is enjoying actually being paid to work for a change! For the moment, though, she has little time to enjoy life in London – she's worked 4 months in obstetrics and gynaecology (probably her favourite area of medicine), 4 months in urology and is now doing 4 months in A&E. She told us about being part of

the 'crash team' – taking the resuscitation equipment to wherever it was needed within the hospital; and the fun she's had on some of the more 'mundane' jobs of removing 'lumps and bumps'. Even with a 4 days on/4 days off schedule, as well as doing special shifts in intensive care, and working as a loco, she occasionally picks up surgical work outside of London and still has to do research and write papers. One of the papers she's helped to research will be published in 'Kidney International' in November. And in what spare time she has, she likes to go running and loves walking around London.

Her 2nd year on the Foundation Course will be at Barnet and Chase Farms, an NHS Trust hospital in North London, where she's hoping she might finally decide on which area to specialise in: possibly obstetrics because she loves the relationships that can develop with women and because she still has such a strong commitment to helping improve the type of care women receive in developing countries. But Julia and I will be surprised if she settles on a specialisation immediately. Katharine has an enthusiasm for so many areas of medicine that she might just as likely return to Canada to be a GP – or head back to Africa, possibly with an organisation like Medicin Sans Frontiers.

Wherever she goes, Katharine feels that Canada will always be 'home': she still feels 'at home' when she returns to Montreal and she is absolutely delighted that Canadians living in the UK have so generously helped her with getting to where she is today. I thoroughly enjoyed meeting Kathryn – and am now all fired up to read through the stack of applications the CCSF received in March. Perhaps I'll find the next Katharine Elliott among them!

Barbara Richards

Picture: Katharine Elliott. March 2009