Entering Medicine

An excerpt from my book by Denis Benjamin

The Compleat Physician - Reflections of a Golden Era of Clinical Medicine

I started medical school at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa in 1963.

Recall the state of the world at the time, especially South Africa. The Republic of South Africa 1960s — world pariah. International economic sanctions. Banned from participation in the Olympic games. The apartheid system is in full force, but small cracks are appearing. The Black Sash movement, spearheaded by a group of courageous women, led to frequent street protests. The Sharpeville massacre, during which 69 black protesters were killed and hundreds wounded, greeted the decade, and was still a fresh memory for all of us, as well as a permanent scar on our psyches.
One doesn't easily forget photographs of dozens of innocent people shot in the back. Nelson Mandela was imprisoned in 1962. No one thought he would ever step off Robben Island. The national universities were still accepting a few non-white students, although this soon ceased, forcing those who wished to become physicians into the segregated university in Durban. The apartheid system seemed entrenched. Immutable.

It was in this milieu that we rushed to the offices of the morning newspaper, the Rand Daily Mail, located in the center of Johannesburg. It published the results of our high school matriculation examinations. Our entire fate was in the balance. Futures depended on a few words — pass, fail, and the number of “distinctions” — those subjects in which one might have excelled, but which the examiners were very stingy in awarding. The matriculation results were posted on boards pasted on the outside wall of the building. They were printed alphabetically in small font. One had to get very close to read them. We swarmed into the street, pushing and shoving to the front. This culminated with screams of delight or cries of anguish.

Unlike in many other countries or later times, acceptance into medical school was entirely dependent on this one examination. No essays, no donations to the alumni association or the football program, no nepotism, no bribery, no long list of nonprofit organizations for which one had volunteered. The rule was simple and brutal. The higher one’s result in this single final matriculation examination — plus any distinctions, especially mathematics, science or Latin — the better. Nothing else mattered. No negotiation. No claiming any special privilege. No filing a court case suggesting some form of discrimination. Unfortunately, the less privileged in the society, comprising over eighty percent of the general population, were largely excluded from this system. Most never even had the opportunity to compete, and for those that did, the number of available positions was very limited.

The discrimination for acceptance into medical school was not limited to race alone. Women, too, faced significant challenges. In part this was a reflection of the time and the expectations. There were few female-physician role models. Many of the all-girl schools did not even offer Latin or some of the sciences as part of their curriculum. They offered biology, at that time a “soft” science, but not physics or chemistry. There was still the widespread societal stereotype of male doctors and female nurses. So it is not surprising that the women who broke through this barrier became overachievers, many eclipsing their male colleagues.

I was one of the fortunate, having the right skin color, gender, supportive parents and some brilliant teachers at King Edward VII High School — a public, boys only, white only, English-speaking.

* * *

Entering Medicine by Denis Benjamin
Written in 2019
Posted on the CHOL 'Share Your Stories' Website in 9/2023

school. It was typical at the time to be segregated into small discrete groups — your clan. Perhaps the word "egalitarian" was not in the Afrikaans dictionary. Even though my family was firmly entrenched in the middle class — I can only recall a couple of family vacations while growing up — the cost of medical school was not an issue. For all intents and purposes it was free, although the small grant I received from my father's Masonic lodge allowed me to purchase some text books.

Finally, I wriggled my way to the front of the crowd and scanned the B's. I stood there with a sense of relief, about to turn seventeen, knowing I was headed to medical school, and would perhaps one day become a physician.

Denis R Benjamin B.Sc., M.B., B.Ch