



INTRODUCTION

“Medicine is a science of uncertainty, and an art of probability.”

SIR WILLIAM OSLER

This book is all about how to study and have a structure, no matter what the challenges you face. I am going to give you a study structure that works even when you are under intense pressure with job commitments, having to do overtime and continual research, in addition to bringing up a family. You will regain control over the various aspects of life.

Doctors, if you read this book you will have an increased capacity to move forward, pass your exams more quickly and get on with life. You will feel more in control. Your career won't be on hold to quite the same extent. I believe by reading this book and following my system, you will increase self-awareness of your strengths and areas that need improvement.

I have created a system that uses the brain's optimal time to study and then later to perform and test various exam components under pressure. By practising regularly this regime becomes a habit.

There are three principles to this system:

- 1 **Content** – learning how to integrate, synthesise and remember the material; understanding the most appropriate times to study to optimise the use of the brain; using deliberate practice strategies to reinforce learning and develop good habits.

- 2 **Delivery** – learning how to get your message out there in oral and written form. Exams are structured in a manner that tests the accuracy of responses under tight time conditions. This generates pressure. You will learn how to test your knowledge under speed- versus-accuracy conditions to enhance the speed and quality of your message.
- 3 **Perception** – learning about yourself and the art of engaging others. This involves several cognitive behavioural strategies and mindfulness techniques, such as adopting effective body language and using the voice in ways that engage the listener.

My private practice specifically focuses on performance enhancement for accredited medical trainees who need to study for major exams, often under difficult and stressful conditions. A typical medical trainee who would consult with me would be a senior registrar in a busy department of a major teaching hospital, let's say the Anaesthetic Department, perhaps in early to mid-thirties. Could be married and maybe has one or two young children. That person is also driven, anxious, and for the first time for years (or ever) is feeling incompetent. She or he has failed an exam!

This trainee has not failed before. They were one of the top students in high school and managed to get through every term in medical school without too much trouble. When applying for the anaesthetic training program they were often accepted at the first go – studied hard for the Primary exam and passed it. Now, three years later, they have failed the Fellowship exam. This is their first experience of failing an exam.

This person is constantly fatigued and quite fearful that they will fail again. They feel that there is nothing but studying and working all the time. They are losing physical fitness, they don't see the kids enough and feel guilty about it, and their partner is trying to hold down a job and look after the children as well. Their partner, although supportive, is certainly tired of bringing up the children virtually alone. Subconsciously, that partner may be adding to the pressure.

The trainee is still feeling ashamed and embarrassed about this failure, especially when others in the study group, who didn't do as well in the practice exams, seemed to pass with flying colours. This person has started to study again for the next exam sitting but feels disheartened and demotivated, with increasing procrastination and sabotaging thoughts. This is the sort of client I am dealing with all the time. This might be you.

The one thing most doctors tell me at their first visit, is that they just want to get their life back. They would like to have just a little bit of free time. Being in a specialist training program is a rigorous and gruelling process. One can spend up to 80 hours at work and still must find time to study on top of that. Any short breaks away, they take their study books. They long to pass their exams, get to see family and friends more often, relax and read some fiction when on holidays, and enjoy free time without the threat of constant study.

And what's coming up? Well, as you read, you will see my ideas are just a little bit different. I don't use jargon. I've obtained information from a variety of sources - from neuroscience to education, psychophysiology to sport psychology - and it's easy to read. There are questionnaires and action plans. There's information in there. There are stories you will identify with. (Names, specialties, gender and other details have all been changed or modified to maintain confidentiality of my clients, for whom I have the utmost admiration.)

WHO AM I, AND HOW CAN I HELP?

In summary, a little bit about me and why I think I'm the right person to write this book. Currently I'm an Adjunct Associate Professor in the School of Social Sciences and Psychology at Western Sydney University, in Sydney, New South Wales. My background is sport and exercise psychology, and in fact I was the first female sport psychologist to

practise in Australia, way back in 1982. The university initiated a Masters in Sport Psychology Degree program in 1998, and I was director of this program till 2005. A couple of years later I was awarded an Australian Psychological Society Award of Distinction for services to sport and exercise psychology.



I still smile when I reflect on how I changed from having a thriving sport psychology practice to having a practice that focuses mostly on performance enhancement for accredited medical trainees. I was being interviewed about stress management on a Sydney radio program when a woman rang up and wanted my contact details. Her son had just failed his Fellowship exams for the second time. He was mortified and devastated.

The way he found out he had failed was particularly heart-breaking. A few hours after the oral exam trainees went to a list pinned up on a large wooden door. If their names were on the list, they had passed. They then opened the door, went inside and sipped champagne with the examiners. If their names were not on the list, they walked away, tail between their legs, feeling totally embarrassed and humiliated. This still happens with some colleges, but now exam candidates also have the choice to have their results emailed to them.

I worked for the next six to eight months with this doctor. I treated him like an athlete who has lost his motivation to train hard. I used many of the techniques I would use with athletes. I also had him describe to me in great detail all the components of each of the written and oral exams. I then worked out ways whereby he could practise these components under pressure. I also helped him plan meticulously for the exam days, just as I would with an athlete on competition days. I impatiently waited for the phone call to let me know if he had passed. He had. I was elated.

This was more exciting than getting an athlete onto an Australian team. From then on, I was hooked.

I work with doctors around Australia and New Zealand from all the major specialities. My PhD in psychophysiology from the University of New South Wales has been particularly useful in enabling me to help doctors to study smarter through the optimal use of the brain. The key to learning is to practise under pressure to perform on demand.

I also enjoy competing as a ballroom dancer in state and national events where the emphasis is on the artistry and athleticism of dance. And you know what? The intense focusing and refocusing that must take place for optimal performance in this sport helps my practice. Dancing is a wonderful way to practise and develop the same skills and strategies that I teach doctors as they prepare for their rigorous written and oral final exams.

A spiritual guru once said: “If you enjoy what you do then you never work a day in your life.” And this is how I feel. I love what I do. I find helping doctors on their journey to get through their final exams is an honour and an amazing privilege. I have a front row seat and I see so many doctors go from being demoralised by failure to having an attitude of increased self-efficacy. Not fighting against the system but fighting and working with the system. And finally, getting through those challenging exams.