

## Real-life story - Ozlem Boztepe

Ozlem started medical school as a mature student at the University of Leeds in 2013 at the age of 31. With a first degree in politics, she had initially planned a career in journalism, but temporary work in hospitals after graduating made her think again.

### Ozlem Boztepe

#### Medical student

#### Employer or university

University of Leeds



Science hadn't been well taught at my school and it never crossed my mind that I could think about becoming a doctor. But whilst I was working as a clinic clerk in plastic surgery the registrars invited me to spend a day in the operating theatre with them. I really loved this experience, but at this stage I didn't have the confidence to think that medicine could be open to me.

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**Introduction**

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Ozlem found the medical world fascinating and began to wonder if she could train as a doctor. Having only studied sciences to GCSE level this initially seemed an impossible dream. No-one in her family had ever been to university before, let alone studied medicine.

Ozlem talked to Medical Careers about her path to medical school and the reasons behind her career change.

“I suppose you could say I fell into medicine. After studying A-levels in history, politics and media studies at college, I went to the University of Hull to study politics. I had my heart set on becoming a journalist and after my degree I worked as a journalist for the London Turkish Gazette. The job was unpaid and I wanted to save for a postgraduate course in journalism, so I started temping in hospitals to earn some money.”

- ### **A change of career**

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Ozlem worked as a clinic clerk in Guy’s and St Thomas’ Hospital for nearly two years and this experience sparked her interest in medicine. “I found the medical environment so interesting,” says Ozlem “and even though a colleague asked me if I might consider a career in medicine I never thought it was something I could realistically do. How could this be an option when I hadn’t even studied sciences beyond GCSE?”

One evening a week, Ozlem volunteered at her local hospice, where she befriended patients and helped the nurses with practical tasks such as feeding patients. “This experience,” says Ozlem “really helped me to feel comfortable around patients.”

In her spare time Ozlem was reading the British Medical Journal avidly and watching medical documentaries on TV. She then moved to a new job as a medical secretary in Harley Street working for a private ophthalmic surgeon. The idea of a journalism career was becoming less appealing and Ozlem became fascinated by the health inequalities within society. This interest led her to a postgraduate diploma in Health Inequalities and Public Policy at the University of Edinburgh, which she funded herself.

- ### **Returning to**

**study**

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"Whilst I was studying at Edinburgh University. I worked as a staff bank medical secretary in NHS Lothian during the holidays. I had various different jobs, in hospitals, community healthcare and general practice. This gave me experience in many different medical and surgical specialties as well as medical terminology. By this time I was certain that I wanted to train as a doctor."

Next came the wise decision to gain some hands-on experience as a healthcare assistant. "My first three months were spent working in care of the elderly," says Ozlem "which included toileting, washing, feeding and dressing elderly patients. I worked for nearly two years as a healthcare assistant in Scotland and this experience was invaluable. You have to be very flexible, fit in quickly and work cooperatively as part of a team."

Ozlem then completed a one-year Access to Biological and Biomedical Sciences at Stevenson College in Edinburgh, whilst working as a healthcare assistant at the weekends and medical secretary during vacations. She undertook this course in order to gain entry to Access to Medicine course at the College of West Anglia, King's Lynn, Norfolk.

"The college staff at Stevenson were incredibly supportive," says Ozlem "and helped me to get an excellent foundation in sciences and get top grades to enter Access to Medicine and medical school after that. The Access to Medicine involved chemistry, biology, physics and maths to a standard beyond A level, as well as [epidemiology](#) [1]. I achieved a distinction which enabled successful medical school application."

Having not studied sciences for twelve years (since GCSEs) it was essential that Ozlem started Stevenson College with the right mindset. "Science is a crucial part of medicine and I knew I wouldn't get into medical school without good science grades" she says. "I banned myself from thinking that I didn't like chemistry, or that sciences would be too hard for me. I believe that you close your mind off to things by being too negative about them. Added to this I had a wonderful tutor, Alasdair Kellog who helped me to develop a love for chemistry. You have to keep on practising your skills and knowledge and make sure that you don't fall behind with your work and tackle any issues immediately."

- **Applying to  
medical school  
and training as  
a doctor**

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Despite gaining a distinction in her Access to Medicine course Ozlem was turned down by all the medical schools she applied to in her initial UCAS application. Undeterred she returned to healthcare assistant and medical PA work and re-applied the following year and was happily offered a place to study medicine at the University of Leeds.

“There was nothing else that I wanted to do. I just knew that I wouldn’t find fulfilment anywhere else. I improved my UCAS personal statement the second time around, which undoubtedly helped. I was completely honest about my reasons for studying medicine as well.”

Ozlem worked and saved hard before starting her medical degree. “The tuition fees for the medical degree are £9000 per year and I am aiming to pay this myself” says Ozlem. “I also get a maintenance loan from the Student Loans Company which goes towards my rent. In the last year of medical school I will get an NHS bursary for my tuition fees. My family are not in a position to help me financially, which provides even more incentive to work during vacation periods, balancing three jobs on a regular basis. The good thing is I enjoy all three posts; the main one being medical PA and the others healthcare assistant roles across two hospitals.”

Ozlem has no regrets at all about her decision to apply to medicine. “I am really enjoying the course,” she says “and I especially like the clinical placements where we see patients. The course has its ups and downs, and sometimes it can be hard to keep motivated. Memorising anatomy, for example, can be difficult and takes many hours of study.”

Finding the positive in any situation is something that seems to come naturally to Ozlem. “If I ever feel down,” she says “I simply remind myself why I am doing this. You have to keep your eye on the goal and visualise the end point, which for me is qualifying as a doctor. My friends and family have also been incredibly supportive, which helps.”

Ozlem started medical school in her early thirties and she is one of 14 mature students out of a total of 250 in her year. “I am the oldest in my year and being a mature student means you sometimes have more confidence than the younger students” says Ozlem. “I’ve really had to prove myself to get into medical school and I have a real hunger for learning. Students straight out of school are in a different situation, but we all get on really well and like any group, we have different strengths and weaknesses.”

The course at the University of Leeds integrates clinical and pre-clinical studies and so students see patients from the first year. Although Ozlem had worked in wards as a healthcare assistant before, gaining clinical experience as a medical student is a very different experience. “For example taking bloods or a history and performing a physical examination were all new to me” explains Ozlem. “However, I had done observations

before and I was asked to show the other students how to do this.”

Communicating with patients is key to being a good doctor and Ozlem feels that this is where her maturity and previous experience make a significant difference. “I find it easier to communicate with patients,” explains Ozlem “and this is such an important part of a doctor’s work. I think my previous experience enables me to see the patient as a whole person and you see the bigger picture.”

Finding somewhere suitable to live is important for any student. Ozlem didn’t really want to be in a large hall of residence with younger students. “The university’s accommodation office helped me to find somewhere suitable to live” says Ozlem. “This year I’m in a small residence with other mature students, which works really well. And if things get too noisy, I can always work in the library which is open until late.”

Fitting in with the social life at the University has also been important to Ozlem. “I sometimes socialise with fellow medical students,” she says” but I also get involved with other groups and societies. I am on the surgical society committee and also participate with a teaching hospitals’ forum for students to give feedback on clinical placements and thus make changes. In addition I write weekly medical and healthcare articles for a Turkish newspaper. There are plenty of other activities on offer for mature students here at the University of Leeds.”

### Ozlem's advice

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Ozlem has three pieces of advice to anyone who is thinking of applying to medicine as a mature student:

1. ensure you research medicine, medical schools and the NHS very carefully. Entry requirements can change from year to year. Keep following the news and take part in relevant forums. Make sure you know about the issues affecting the NHS, and the political agenda as medicine is a lifelong career and healthcare and training are undergoing changes.
2. continue to evaluate your CV and your application all the time. Your academic achievements need to be good but be brutally honest and address any issues in your CV. Don’t make excuses - show how you have progressed from that.
3. whatever your background, go for it! Don’t let anything or anyone stop you

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### Links

[1] <https://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/glossary#Epidemiology>