

Camp Quality Doctor...

...not your usual week in the office.

Dear Colleague,

I write this article with a heavy heart knowing that one of my good friends is currently unwell and in hospital. I hope that Ben will not mind being mentioned, but to me he has been the strongest memory I carry from my most exciting and enjoyable work at Camp Quality; a specialised organisation whose primary aim is to bring hope and happiness to children and their families living with cancer.

Ben, whilst not your typical Camp Quality attendee, certainly embodies the hope and aspirations of Vera Entwistle, the founder of Camp Quality, when she saw the need for support and fun for children living with a major illness.

At the tender age of 10, Ben is a slight 14kg, living with marked physical, cognitive and medical challenges. Ben also has a passion for cars, a good laugh, and it would seem, is quite comfortable playing the clown.

Today, burned into my memory, are his laughs and smiles as he spent over an hour pushing me into a freezing pool, his tears as we encouraged him to have his medicine, and his reassuring pat on my back as I cried, worried about his health. These are the memories that I carry from my work at Camp Quality; certainly an experience I never expected to have when working in a busy GP practice.

I have to admit it was with great trepidation that I replied to an e-mail that was sent to seek a replacement doctor when their usual doctor had been called to London.

Much like the colleagues I spoke with, I was concerned that I did not possess the skills needed to care for children living with cancer. It is only now I realise that while keeping up to date with current chemotherapy is useful, it is the skills of communication, compassion and care that are the most needed.

While I would love to say that I was able to provide these skills in abundance, I was fortunate to be surrounded by my own team of carers that helped and guided not only myself, but the remarkable group of volunteers that had elected to take one week out of their life to give a "time of their life" experience to the children attending this camp.

For many of the children attending camp, it is the time of their life...

We, the carers are equally fortunate to be able to have been witness to their joy.

So it was with moderate "butterflies" I took to the challenge of providing medical care not only to 42 children, but also the volunteers that attended. Added to my concern was the additional twist of this year's camp being hosted on an island, 15 minutes away via boat, and an additional 15 minutes of driving to get to the nearest hospital. Being the obsessional "Type A" personality that seems to be abundantly popular in doctors, I prepared for the worst, and of course prayed for the best! Thankfully the latter won!

Arriving before the campers, I had the opportunity to set up my dream clinic, complete with relaxing couches, enough lollies to sink a ship and a cool water dispenser that became a focal point for campers topping up for their various adventures.

Of course, we were also armed with a barrage of medications, antibiotics, dressings, an oncology nurse, a paediatric nurse and an emergency nurse. Oh, and the camp leader? He was a paramedic. Needless to say we had our bases covered.

So we had the medical side licked, now we just needed some people to care for! I can still remember my heart pounding when the first boat-load of campers arrived.

Having walked in cold, I really did not realise how many strong and lasting relationships had already been formed at previous camps. But by the end of the day I had been taken in, welcomed to the family and christened: "Dr George, the go-to guy for all your medical needs!".

To be honest, from here forward it was pretty much a flurry. Between helping dose medications, providing first aid, advice and a listening ear, I was able to check out the activities, play with the kids, and get to know the remarkable adults - or companions, in CQ language - who had devoted themselves to supporting the campers 24/7 for a week. Quite a task, and one I acknowledge I would find very challenging indeed! It was through the companions that I learnt the true spirit of Camp Quality.

Each companion had their own special story, their own particular calling, all different, each tied to a theme of love, devotion and the amazing feeling it is to care, serve and share the incredible journey these children tread.

Thankfully many of the campers are healthy, fit and stronger for their experience. Some are still travelling. Sadly, not all will complete their journey in the way the world dreams. It is my hope, and that of all the staff of Camp Quality, that no matter the destination, their journey is one of joy and happiness; injected with some laughter, fun, and a bloody good water bomb fight!

For me, I take away some amazing learning experiences:

I have learned the remarkable strength, wisdom and tenacity these children can demonstrate when they live in a world that is less than perfect...

I have learned that despite all the horror, shock and evil we are fed daily by the media, there are wonderful, caring people out there who are able to put their own comfort to one side to help support the future generation...

I have learned that medicine is far more exciting and wonderful than exams, text books and dodging drug seeking patients...

I have learned that medicine, the true role of caring, flows from the heart no matter the outcome...

Naturally, it took a while to come back to my regular work after such a truly inspirational experience. In talking with my mentor, Chris, he shared the following thought:

"If each and every doctor, was to take just one week from their life each year to serve, can you imagine how amazing the world would be?"

So my question to you is, how will you spend your week?

Sincerely, George Forgan-Smith