

Engaging with society

Nazia Peer is an award winning short story writer and novelist and a medical doctor reading for a master of laws degree at Cardiff University. In 2006 she was awarded the Nelson Mandela scholarship, which recognises the leadership potential of young South Africans. **Tiago Villanueva** finds out more



Fact file

Name—Nazia Peer

Position—Medical doctor reading for a master of laws degree in the legal aspects of medical practice at Cardiff University

Biography— In 2006 she was awarded the Nelson Mandela scholarship, which recognises the leadership potential of young South Africans. She published her first novel, *House of Peace*, in 2005 and has written an award winning short story

Do you think medical students should learn about medical law?

It should become a necessity. Doctors work in an environment that exposes them to legally binding situations with every patient. These have important consequences which cannot be ignored as they were in the past. In terms of good healthcare practice, doctors need to understand their patients and their rights, as well as their own. Medical law should be an essential part of health education, especially in a country where we want to improve levels of health care.

Why did you come to the UK to study?

We have a lot to learn from the UK health system, which is not very different from that in South Africa. In both countries many people rely on a state system, while an elite few use world class private care. As the UK system has developed over decades, much can be learnt from the point of view of avoiding pitfalls and replicating successes.

The course at Cardiff is a leading course in medical law in the UK. It is unique as a law degree for healthcare professionals as well as law graduates. The multidisciplinary team of presenters are leaders in their fields and have key roles in healthcare structures in the UK.

What doors do you think it will open?

When I return to South Africa I hope to participate in healthcare development at a policy level. There are a handful of South African graduates who have a thorough and first hand knowledge of a developed, first world, healthcare system, which immediately singles me out. I am in a unique position because of my clinical experience as there are few or no legally trained policy advisers who also have this experience (or vice versa). I believe that there will be some important opportunities within the government or non-governmental sector.

How do you see yourself? As a multifaceted doctor with many interests, including medical law and writing? As a writer or humanist who is also a doctor?

I have always been interested in empowering people. In South Africa, a young, growing democracy, there are many aspects of our rainbow nation that demand our attention and which present a challenge. Practising medicine provides an obvious outlet for social service.

Writing has given me the platform to tell the stories of ordinary South Africans, no matter what their perceived differences. In this way I have tried to make my contribution to nation building—an imperative for all South Africans.

I am unconcerned about labels and what people prefer to call me, as long as I can make a positive contribution to our burgeoning democracy.

Do you intend to go back to clinical medicine?

Yes I do, at some point. HIV is crippling our country and mere patient contact strengthens my hope and commitment to the cause. I do, however, want to focus on public health policy in South Africa and maybe do some research in this area.

Do you think doctors should get involved in things outside clinical medicine?

Yes, if they find the time and have the inclination. Studying medicine takes a long time (eight years in South Africa), and in that time students have to focus so much time and effort on the degree. Our contemporaries who read for other degrees have more spare time, which allows them to enjoy extracurricular activities such as art, poetry, and film. To participate in these activities will, in my opinion, allow medics to develop socially.

Participation in broader society must surely go hand in hand with practising medicine since this is, arguably, one of the strongest motivators for reading for a medical degree in the first place.

What is driving the exodus of South African healthcare professionals?

Initially many doctors emigrated because they predicted an unstable political climate. The democratic process also generated a lot of negativity and pessimism among some. As the democratic process has become established and professionals have realised that the African National Congress led government has had considerable success, the motivation has probably shifted towards dissatisfaction with financial benefits. In South Africa, doctors, especially in the public sector, are probably underpaid. Others leave because they fear crime, but although it does exist, it is decreasing.

The “Homecoming Revolution” campaign has encouraged numbers of disillusioned South Africans living abroad to return to a country that offers a stable economic and political climate and which is brimming over with opportunity.

Tiago Villanueva general practitioner registrar, USF Tornada, Caldas da Rainha, Portugal
Tiago.villanueva@gmail.com

Competing interests: None declared.

Provenance and peer review: Not commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.