

Between Herbs and Science: The Search for Answers That Led Me to Medicine

(By Mei Rose Johnson)

When I was ten, I could not understand how two people who had devoted their lives to helping others could struggle so much to understand each other. My mother is a passionate herbalist. She made sure everyone knew that she had inherited her knowledge from her mother, who had inherited it from her own mother. My father is an accomplished surgeon, from a family with a long history of surgeons. Their



marriage ended, and I grew up carrying a question that neither herbs nor a scalpel could answer: **Why could they not find common ground?**

A Childhood Between Two Beliefs

My parents divorced when I was ten. Their conflicting beliefs about health and healing were part of the division between them. My father's work was rooted in scientific medicine. As a surgeon, he approached illness through medical knowledge, investigation and treatment. My mother believed strongly in herbal medicine and a natural way of living.

As a child, I did not have the language to understand their disagreements. I knew only that I loved them both and that their differences had changed our family. I grew up with my mother, surrounded by her beliefs and her work. Yet my father's profession remained an important part of my story. Even when I followed in my mother's footsteps, questions about my father's perspective stayed with me.

Growing Up in My Mother's Clinic

My mother's clinic became a familiar part of my childhood. I helped her there, watched her listen to people and saw the relationships she built with her clients. The clinic did well. Clients returned, and many expressed appreciations for the help they felt they received. I admired my mother's commitment and the attention she gave to those who came through her door. Her beliefs shaped her everyday life, too. She ate organic food, sometimes went foraging and preferred to manage her own illnesses without going to hospital.

Growing up, I saw this as a sign of how deeply my mother believed in her approach. As my education developed, I began to recognise that conviction alone could not answer every question about health, safety or treatment. Still, one lesson from those early years has remained with me. People want to feel heard. Whatever their symptoms, they arrive with worries, experiences and hopes that deserve attention.

Following My Mother's Footsteps

My experiences in the clinic inspired me to study a **BSc (Hons) in Clinical Herbalism**. I wanted to deepen my knowledge and approach the work with greater understanding. Studying gave me opportunities to learn, gain experience with patients and reflect more carefully on the responsibilities involved in caring for others. For someone interested in herbal medicine, structured education can be a valuable opportunity to ask questions and develop a more informed approach. For me, the course was rewarding because it connected something familiar from childhood with a new commitment to learning.

After graduating, I returned to work in my mother's clinic. There was satisfaction in contributing to a place that had helped shape me. I valued the conversations with clients and the opportunity to support them. But alongside that satisfaction, more questions began to emerge.

The Questions I Could Not Leave Behind

My mother and father both wanted to help people. Why, then, had their approaches created such distance between them? Had they disagreed about evidence? About risk? About what counted as successful treatment? Had each felt that the other dismissed something central to their identity? I could not answer those questions simply by working in the clinic.

After a few years, I gradually wanted to learn how medical doctors make decisions when symptoms are unclear, when time matters and when the consequences of a mistake can be serious. I also began to recognise that understanding my parents'

professions would not necessarily explain everything about their marriage. A relationship contains feelings, communication and experiences that an academic course cannot fully uncover. But studying medicine could help me understand a part of the conflict that had shaped my childhood.

Choosing Medicine at Thirty-Five

At thirty-five, I enrolled in medical school. I brought years of experience as a herbalist, a lasting interest in caring for people and a willingness to examine what I thought I knew. Becoming a student again meant accepting uncertainty. It meant making room for unfamiliar ideas and allowing evidence to challenge beliefs I had grown up around. My decision also carried a personal hope. I wanted to understand my father's world with the same seriousness I had given my mother's. For years, I had known scientific medicine largely through the disagreements surrounding it. Now I wanted to study it for myself.

Learning to Bring Compassion and Evidence Together

I am now in my third year of studying medicine. The deeper I go into my studies, the more carefully I think about health and healing. I am learning to ask what supports a treatment, what its limitations are and what further investigation a patient might need. My herbal background remains part of who I am, but I want to examine it with greater scientific understanding. Bringing these areas together requires careful questions about evidence, possible interactions and patient safety.

My interest is in understanding where research can offer useful answers and where uncertainty remains. That curiosity may eventually lead me towards research involving herbal medicines or work exploring complementary approaches. Whatever direction I take, I want my decisions to be guided by sound evidence and the needs of the person in front of me.

An NHS Dream and a Deeper Purpose

After completing my medical degree and meeting the required training and registration requirements, I hope to work as a doctor in the NHS. I want to build on the listening skills I developed in my mother's clinic while gaining the clinical knowledge and judgement needed to practise medicine responsibly. My studies began partly with a desire to understand my parents.

I may never discover a complete explanation for why their marriage ended. Some answers belong to my parents, and some may always remain beyond my reach. But I can choose what I do with the questions they left me. At ten, I stood between two people I loved, unable to understand their differences. At thirty-five, I chose to study those differences. Now, in my third year of medicine, I am building a future in which curiosity, compassion and evidence can guide how I care for others.