

Planning a gap year

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The thought first occurred to me as I was writing my fourth [discharge summary](#), the morning after a busy after-hours shift. The thought bubble sounded something like: “is this all there is?” I’d finished high school, done science and halfway through realised I wanted to do medicine. I did the GAMSAT and then the interview and got into medicine straight away. There was no way I was going to turn it down, as I’d had plenty of friends who hadn’t been so lucky. Four years later, I was desperate to actually start life as a doctor (and get paid).

[Internship](#) flew past in a blur of long hours, information overload and a general sense of exhaustion. Don’t get me wrong, I loved it, but before I knew it I was pre-interviewing, preparing my CV and madly trying to figure out a way of securing a job on the training program I wanted. Looking forward, I could see that physician’s training at RPAH was going to be tough. I felt slightly terrified at the thought of years of hard work combined with the pressure of studying for exams in my spare time but I had to get into the program while I was “in” with the right people and before the tidal wave of junior doctors caught up with me.

Needing a break from the stress of the hamster wheel

It felt really stressful and only looking back now do I realise why: I was constantly living in the future. Not everyone believes in the power of [mindfulness](#) and meditation but the message is akin to “still your mind and live in the here and now”. I was doing the exact opposite and constantly striving for the next goal, the next training program or the next project. I was on the hamster wheel and I didn’t know how to get off.

After much reflection, I realised I didn’t want to get off the hamster wheel, I just wanted it to stop spinning for a little while. The only way to do that, I figured, was to take a year off. My boyfriend (a fellow resident who felt much the same way) and I decided we’d go travelling for a year. It wasn’t just about [burnout](#), it was about not getting totally caught up in the system and forgetting about the rest of the world. Turns out, there’s more to life than a career in medicine (not that I’m knocking it, I came straight back after all).

Reactions to my gap year plans

Friends said: Are you nuts? What if you come back and you can't get a job? What if all the goodwill is lost in a year, they might not remember you? Just get onto the program while you can! There are more and more trainees and less and less jobs! My mother helpfully suggested that I was getting older and perhaps it was more sensible to save my money to buy a house and start planning a family.

Senior clinicians kept telling us that it would be fine, we were hardly going to be *less* employable with an extra year of life experience under our belt. It was a big, scary decision because we were worried about getting into a training program, getting a mortgage and starting a family but as soon as we'd made it, we felt great. I guess it would have been different if we'd already had kids and a mortgage but we didn't, we were well behind in our developmental milestones, so what's another year?? We were the most relaxed final term residents in the hospital. I put smiley faces in the discharge letters (my registrar took them out).

Locum paid for our gap year

Here's where it gets good. Did you know that if you Locum for 10 weeks, you can pay for 3 months driving through continental Europe, 3 months travelling through the Balkans and 2 months backpacking, diving and drinking your way through Central America? Well, you can. We even threw in a week skiing in Switzerland (where I got choppered off the mountain after a massive stack) and a couple of weeks in Morocco (highly recommend). We had the best year of our lives and it was **cost neutral** (so there, mum!).

You can do anything you want with a year off though you don't have to be quite as hedonistic as we were. We could have volunteered in the developing world, we could have opened a flower shop or moved to Brazil. We'd put our real-world lives on hold and the total freedom that came with that was fantastically refreshing.

Final thoughts on taking a gap year

So should you take a year off? Of course you should. I'm being unashamedly clichéd, but you really do only live once. If you really want it, you'll get into that training program in the end. If you don't, it won't be the year off that was the problem. You have to remember that once you're in, you'll be working full time and studying in your spare time so what's the hurry? Plus, you might have a mother like mine who's wondering where the grandchildren are (apologies to those who have already obliged).

We came back, got into physician's training and I am now loving advanced training in nephrology. I'm not sure I would have made it in one sane piece had I not had the opportunity to do something completely differently for a little while. I enjoy being a doctor and I'm glad I chose this path, despite the pressures, because I find medicine really rewarding. I am *more* glad that I took that year off though and it's those stories I'll be re-telling for the rest of my life.

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