Thea Manning spoke to students who had given up successful careers to study medicine. Has it been a challenge? Yes. Has it been worth it? Absolutely.

When Sydney Medical School moved from a six year undergraduate medical degree to a four year graduate entry program in 1997, at the same time allowing students with a broad academic background rather than more traditional sciences, one of the aims was to encourage those with a clear commitment based on their own life experience to become doctors.

The change opened the door for a new group of students, professionals who had already prospered in previous careers, often no way connected to medicine. By far the biggest group of students starting medicine continues to be those direct from undergraduate degrees – and the median commencing age for the program hovers around 24 years of age. But there is also a significant group who have had a solid stretch working at a high level in a previous career. For example, in 2015 there were 40 students aged 30 and above commencing medical studies – all with previous professional experience and roles.

LISA PRYOR, 36 – GRADUATING 2015

After completing a Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Laws at the University of Sydney, Lisa Pryor was an accomplished journalist at The Sydney Morning Herald, with roles including investigative reporter and opinion page editor. She has also written two successful books, The Pin Striped Prison – How Overachievers Get Trapped in Corporate Jobs They Hate (Picador) and A Small Book About Drugs – The Debate We Need to Have About Recreational Drugs (Allen & Unwin). Lisa is interested in psychiatry.

Was there a particular moment that made you decide to do medicine? Really it was the culmination of many moments, but there is one which stands out for me. It was New Year’s Eve 2009, when I was writing my book about recreational drug use. For research I spent the night with the doctors at the Emergency Department of St Vincent’s Hospital in Darlinghurst. I loved that night so much, the variety of patients and the calm control of the doctors. It seemed to me that medicine was a job where you could devote yourself to serious learning and intellectual development while still being among the cut and thrust of life. I liked that combination so started studying for GAMSAT, figuring it would be a worthwhile exercise to improve my grasp of science, even if I didn’t get in to med school.

What is it like going back to being a student after a professional job? It has been humbling but also exciting in a strange way. Humbling because of the loss of power, status and, let’s face it, income. This has probably been good for my character but there are still moments where I imagine what I might be doing now if I kept charging forward in my previous career rather than starting from the bottom in medicine. Exciting because it meant embarking on something fresh and surprising and worthwhile at an age when many people struggle with the sameness of life.

What have been some of the best experiences of the degree? The privilege of entering the lives of patients and seeing aspects of life many people never have the opportunity to see. This year has included experiences such as helping heroin users in the supervised injecting room in Kings Cross, talking to patients in an acute psychiatric unit and watching babies being born in obstetrics.

What have been some of the challenges? Is it worth it? I can answer this question very simply by saying I am the mother of a three year old and a five year old. I’m happy to say that they are great kids and have a wonderful life which is full of love but this is only possible because I am extremely fortunate to have a wonderful husband and very involved parents and parents-in-law. When I collect my degree in December (touch wood) I will be very conscious that it has been a team effort. As for whether it is worth it, yes it is, at the same time I sometimes feel like I have chosen a life which is full of meaning and purpose rather than a life which is easy. Personally I find it harder to live without purpose than to live without ease, so I am happy with my choices for now.

ESTELLE NOONAN, 34 – GRADUATING 2017

Estelle Noonan completed a PhD in the Department of Gender and Cultural Studies, lectured at the University of Sydney and coordinated the Medical Humanities Graduate Program. Estelle has recently given birth to her first child, Dominic.

Was there a particular moment that made you decide to do medicine? The role of Medical Humanities is to enhance health practice by teaching health humanities to health practitioners (literature and medicine, history of medicine etc.). So, in my job, the majority of my students were doctors, often quite late in their careers. I loved hearing their accounts of their work and was struck by how rewarding they found it. However, it wasn’t until I became a patient myself that I realised that I wanted to be doctor. There was a particular moment when it happened. I was 31, and I was about to undergo my second spinal surgery. I was terrified that it wouldn’t be successful. The night before surgery my surgeon came to visit me in my hospital room. After a few minutes I felt completely reassured that I was in good hands so to speak. I realised that I wanted to be a part of that process of passing on security to others. When the surgeon left the room, I turned to my (now) husband and said “I think I want to be a doctor.” We had never discussed it before. He said “great, you
deployments to Afghanistan, the Middle East and Pakistan.

What is it like going back to being a student after a professional job? I started out as a nerdy literature student doing an Arts degree. This path led me to complete a PhD in the Department of Gender and Cultural studies at Sydney University, where I lectured before getting a job coordinating the Medical Humanities Graduate Program at Sydney University in the Centre for Values, Ethics and the Law in Medicine (VELiM). I still do guest lectures for VELiM when I get the opportunity.

Going back to being a student wasn’t strange for me – I’ve studied in some form all of my adult life. It did feel frustrating in some senses, going ‘backwards’ from being a teacher to being a student again. I felt that transition quite strongly as Medicine is a more overtly hierarchical than academia/humanities teaching. I’m very used to it now. Studying science for the first time was also a real challenge. I didn’t even do science for my HSC, so becoming acquainted with that way of learning and thinking was new to me. It took a good year to get certain basic principles under my belt and even longer to feel like I was really capable of scientific reasoning.

What have been some of the best experiences of the degree? Connecting with patients at crucial, vulnerable, and reflective moments. It’s a privilege to share these times with them as a part of one’s training. I’ve also formed some very strong friendships with other students in the program.

What have been some of the challenges? Is it worth it? There have been many challenges. I gave up a previous career and, with that, ongoing income and possibilities of advancement. Luckily, my husband has been able to support me financially and emotionally in this endeavour; not all people can be that lucky. The experience has also been medically challenging. I was still recovering from back surgery when I started medicine, trying to rehabilitate myself through regular exercises and so on, which was difficult to balance with study. Finally, I felt a great deal of emotional pressure in the first year to determine whether or not I had made the right choice in abandoning my previous life and choosing medicine. Luckily, my answer came swiftly, I’ve never looked back.

In May this year, I gave birth to my first child, so I am currently on 12 months maternity leave, which poses challenges of its own! Is it worth it? Absolutely.

DAVID GRAHAM, 38 – GRADUATING 2016

David has over a decade of experience in the Department of Defence managing large research projects and providing advice to senior decision-makers in Australia and on operational deployments to Afghanistan, the Middle East and Pakistan. He’s in the third year of his degree and hopes to specialise in Paediatrics or General Practice with special interest in child health.

Was there a particular moment that made you decide to do medicine? Medicine was a scratch that I always wanted to itch. I’d kept abreast of the major advances in medicine over the years, but I had thought it was a dream. Besides, I was reluctant to give up my career to start over. But when I returned from Afghanistan in 2010 I found myself struck down with illness that required 3 months recovery. During that time I took stock of who I was, what I’d achieved, and where I wanted to go. It wasn’t until I met a 45 year old intern at a friend’s place that I found the courage to start over. I studied hard for the GAMSAT as I knew I only had one opportunity to satisfy the 10 year rule. Would you believe I was in Afghanistan when my GAMSAT result came through and I was desperately trying to submit my application over a dodgy satellite link before hopping on a charter flight to Kandahar!

What is it like going back to being a student after a professional job? Starting from the bottom has been refreshing and the transition was relatively smooth. In fact I’m finding study second time round much easier as I’ve developed good time-management skills and the capability to quickly appraise and synthesise new information and communicate it in a timely manner. After all, it’s what I’d been doing for over a decade in situations that either lives or billions of dollars mattered. I found myself conducting extramural research and enrolling in an MPhil to really round out my studies!

What have been some of the best experiences of the degree? Medicine is a contact sport. So without a shadow of doubt, the clinical placements have been the best. Working alongside and learning from experienced physicians and surgeons has been invaluable and contact with patients has been immensely rewarding. Even as a student you can make a real difference in people’s lives and have input into the management of their health. It is a humbling experience being allowed into someone’s life when they’re at their lowest ebb.

What have been some of the challenges? Is it worth it? Time and money have been the biggest sacrifices. I feel that I’m recovering some of the taxes that I paid over the years! But we’ve had to dip into our savings. The real challenge has been striking a balance to make room for quality time with my young family. So this career change has needed sacrifices from my whole family. I cannot overstate my gratitude for my wife and daughter’s support.

David and family