

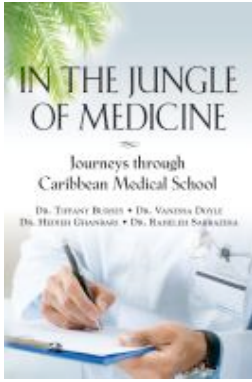


# IN THE JUNGLE OF MEDICINE



## Journeys through Caribbean Medical School

DR. TIFFANY BURSEY • DR. VANESSA DOYLE  
DR. HEDIEH GHANBARI • DR. RAHELEH SARBAZIHA



*This book is the story of four young Canadian doctors who each attended Ross University School of Medicine on the island of Dominica in the Caribbean. It was there, beneath the scorching sun, near banana plantations and mango groves, and under the tropic of cancer, that they toiled away in an attempt to fulfill their dreams of one day becoming physicians. Life was not easy for these four and living in a developing country was a challenge in itself, not to speak of their efforts studying medicine. At times, it must have felt as though they were trapped in the tortuous nightmare of Sisyphus. This new and unusual world was certainly not for the feint of heart. While each doctor has taken a different path, they have all ended up in the same place, bonded together in the sisterhood of tropical medicine, and they have all moved on to gain prestigious residencies.*

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**IN THE JUNGLE OF MEDICINE: Journeys through Caribbean  
Medical School**

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First Edition

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## CHAPTER 1

### ONE DOOR CLOSSES... ANOTHER ONE OPENS



***When one door of happiness closes, another opens, but often we look so long at the closed door that we do not see the one that has been opened for us.***

***–Helen Keller***

Dr. T

Molo! That's "Hello" in Xhosa, one of the many languages of South Africa. My name is Tiffany and when I grow up I will be a family doctor! I am thrilled to be able to share my crazy adventure through medical school and residency. Before I get too far, I should tell you a bit about myself. I was born and raised in Vancouver, British Columbia. I went to the University of British Columbia and learned all about cell biology and genetics. I love to snowboard, dive and play sports, especially volleyball.

My first real experience at a hospital was when I was two. I had swallowed a quarter. I did this all by myself and I was so proud. They kept me in the hospital for two days until the quarter finally showed up in my diaper. I'd like to say that I was inspired at that moment to become a doctor after all it takes a special physician to sift through a

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diaper and find a quarter. More than likely, it was either my mom or a nurse who found the quarter, but the point remains.

Fast forward a couple of decades... I applied for medical school in my fourth year of undergraduate studies hoping that I would be accepted and start medical studies the following September. I knew that the application process was super competitive, but I figured I had a good shot at making the cut, at least for an interview. I felt that I was fairly well rounded; my GPA was good; I had won numerous scholarships and bursaries over the years for scholastic excellence; and I had an abundance of volunteer experience both on campus, in the community and internationally. I was also an executive officer in two different clubs on campus, founder and director of the annual campus softball tournament in which all the proceeds went to the Ronald McDonald House, I volunteered at Vancouver Children's Hospital, was the Director of the Ice Hockey League on Campus and I participated in multiple philanthropy events both on campus and in the community. My most amazing volunteer experience and probably the most heart filled and memorable experience of my life was volunteering in an orphanage in Africa where I cared for over 100 children, many of which were HIV positive. I was also very involved in sports and participated in almost every intramural event and league being awarded Top Athlete of the Year two years in a row. I was a director of a Vancouver Beach volleyball league and also played in many community leagues and tournaments.

But, unfortunately, even with my GPA, extra-curricular and volunteer experience going for me, my biggest weakness was my MCAT score. It was definitely nothing to be proud of. I always hoped that if they would only give me an interview, I could explain why my MCAT score was lacking. I had studied all spring for the exam and about a month before I had to sit for my exam, I lost my very best friend in a car accident. Actually, two of my friends were killed in that accident, but one of them was more than my best friend, she was like a sister to me. I was in the car about 15 minutes before a car ran a red light and killed her. We had gone out dancing and then for a late night coffee; she dropped me off at home, gave me a hug and said "see you tomorrow" and that was the last time I ever saw her again. I was supposed to sleep over at her house that night, but at the last minute,

I asked her to turn around and drop me off because I had to work in the morning. Sometimes I feel guilty for asking her to turn back, thinking that maybe if she hadn't, she would not have been at that intersection at that moment. Other times I think, I too could have died that night. Losing my best friend was devastating. She meant the world to me and I hold onto and cherish her in my heart forever. Between family events, viewings, funerals, community vigils and celebrations of life, I was physically and mentally exhausted. I tried to study between all of the emotion and commitment, but every time I was alone and finally found time to focus, all I could do was cry and think about her. I wondered if I should postpone my test, but I had already registered and paid the fee. In retrospect, I should have probably deferred it and written it in the fall, but my head was just not in it and I know I could have done better. Still, I am stuck with the MCAT scores I had, although not strong, I figured if I could only get a chance at an interview, I could explain.

I didn't even think about applying to other provinces when I applied to medical school. I couldn't afford it. I was on a serious student budget. Each application costs somewhere from \$40-150 dollars and I didn't have enough money to spread my applications across the country. In retrospect, it would have been cheaper than going to school in the Caribbean, but the money was just not available at the time. I managed to pay for university on my own with little assistance from my parents. I worked part-time on weeknights and weekends as a lifeguard and swimming instructor, and paid for my housing, groceries, bills, tuition and books with the money I earned. I did it on my own and I was proud of myself for what I had accomplished. But with no extra money to spare, I couldn't afford to apply to med schools across the country.

When I applied to UBC, I thought I had a good chance. I thought that I would at least get an interview. After waiting nervously for the mail each day, my fate was finally delivered and, unfortunately, it was a nicely written rejection letter telling me that I was close, but not close enough. Because my application score fell just short of an interview, they invited me in to talk to one of the medical school academic advisors who would go over my application with me one-on-one and help me in areas I could improve on for the following year. The

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advisor looked over my application and said that I had a strong application, but it would just take some time before I got in. There are only so many spots, some of which are reserved for out-of-province and international students. The advisor suggested I work on my Master's degree and continue to do volunteer work. I left feeling a bit defeated. It's not that I didn't have enough experience; it was that there were only so many spots and I would have to keep buffing up my application and try again next year.

Some time after, I remember coming out of a biology class one day and seeing this poster hanging on the wall with a doctor in scrubs playing beach volleyball on a gorgeous Caribbean beach. I was sold! I wanted to be a doctor, I loved beach volleyball and I definitely wanted the experience of living in the Caribbean. After doing my research into the various international medical schools, I realized there were tons of schools in the Caribbean, some bigger than others, some more expensive than others, some that were accredited in more places than others, and most importantly, I started to realize that there were many Canadians who had gone abroad for medical school and found their ways back to Canada to practice in all sorts of fields.

After doing my research, I narrowed it down to two schools: Ross University School of Medicine (Dominica) and St. George's University (Grenada). Both on beautiful Caribbean islands, both great medical schools, and both well recognized with graduates all over the USA and Canada. I initially applied to both schools, but later chose to pursue Ross University – partly because tuition was lower, partly because I preferred their semester outline, and mostly because I learned a friend of a friend had gone to Ross and was not only successful in becoming a physician, but loved his entire experience.

To be honest, I had never even heard of Dominica. I initially thought it was the Dominican Republic, but soon learned the difference between Dominica (pronounced Dom-in-ika) and the Dominican Republic. Dominica, it turns out, is one of the most stunning and gorgeous countries in the Caribbean.

After being accepted into Ross University School of Medicine, I had three months to get my life together. I was moving to the Caribbean,



starting a new adventure, and a new journey. I was excited and nervous at the same time. I had just started dating someone new and worried that when I left for medical school, I might not ever see him again. We had really hit things off! He was funny, athletic, caring and an all-around sweetheart (not to mention good looking). The more time I spent with him leading up to my departure, the closer we grew together and the more I was falling for him. I had no idea when I said goodbye to him at the airport the day I flew to Dominica that six years later we would be married and the crazy roller-coaster of medical school and residency would all be a blur!

Dr. V

I come from the most easterly part of North America, Newfoundland and Labrador, where perseverance is a part of our collective DNA. You cannot survive on a rock in the mid North Atlantic without stamina and a wonderful sense of humour. Newfoundlanders have lived here for more than 500 years.

I grew up in a small coastal town called New Ferolle, which is located on the North West coast of the island, where my family has owned and operated a fishing business for more than 60 years. It was here as a young girl that I dreamed of being a physician. My mother tells a story of me posting a sign on my bedroom door that read "Vanessa Doyle, MD" when I was just 6 years old. The dream began at a young age for me. My father, of course, tried to steer me toward the business our family had operated for generations.

Through my high school years I found myself drawn to the sciences as empirical evidence meant more to me than the hidden floral messages of poems and short stories. I liked discovering new ideas through science. These interests led me to a Biology degree at St Francis Xavier University located in Antigonish Nova Scotia and to eventually work for a pharmaceutical research company after graduation. This time in my life, while exciting, was still unfulfilling. There existed a void in me that could not be avoided.

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I went back to university having been accepted into the fast-track nursing program. This is a program that allows certain students to complete a four-year Bachelor of Nursing degree in two years. Once completed, I worked for a major hospital in the cardiology ward and then later in community health. It was a fascinating time in my life for I had taken my first steps through the doorway of the hallowed halls of medicine.

Having worked as a Cardiology and Community Health nurse for three very productive years, I decided to apply to medical school. I only applied to one medical school in Canada, Memorial University, in my home province. This school accepted 60 new students per year into its medical program and the competition was fierce with thousands applying. In hindsight, I should have applied to other Canadian medical schools as well, but I was naive and had no direction in this regard. I limited my chances considerably. Canada has 17 medical schools and I would advise anyone thinking of applying to go long and wide. In some years, Canadian medical schools receive 14,000 applications for 2,400 positions – yikes!

At any rate, Memorial University did not select me as a successful candidate. To say that I was very disappointed would be an understatement. I carried on nursing and tried my best to keep my spirits up. A few weeks after this rejection, I was visiting my family doctor and he introduced me to his medical student: Michael VanVliet. It was Michael who told me not to give up the dream and to fight on until I achieved it. He was amazing and so positive in his comments to me. Michael was in his 10th semester at Ross University School of Medicine and he encouraged me to apply and start as soon as I could. Michael is now a practicing ER physician in British Columbia and continues to inspire and mentor Canadians from across the country who are attending Ross University School of Medicine.

I applied to RUSM on November 5, 2007 and was accepted into the program one month later on December 5, 2007. I flew to Dominica to begin lectures on January 4, 2008. I was a very happy person: eager, happy, and proud! This was my chance and I was set to earn it.

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I should mention that I did look at medical schools in Ireland, Poland and other countries, including elsewhere in the Caribbean, like AUC, Saba and St George's.

Saba was too small and confining for my liking. Although it is a small, but very good program, it appeared to have some limitations. The program at St George's also looked very good, but I didn't like that they took a semester off each year. This to me was wasting time and time was too precious a commodity for me.

Here are the tuition costs for the three schools that I seriously looked into:

AUC

St. Maarten

\$16,900 - Basic Science

\$18,900 - Clinical

St. George

Grenada

Terms

Term 1&2: \$22,414

Term 3&4: \$30,660

Clinical - \$22,625

Ross

Dominica

\$18,825 - Basic Science

\$20,775 - Clinical.

You should be aware that all tuition rates in Caribbean schools are paid in US dollars. It is very wise to watch the Canadian dollar closely and to move all or part of your Line of Credit into US dollars when it is most advantageous. Some of my friends were caught paying tuition when the Canadian dollar was 0.77 cents against its US counterpart. Not nice!

So, my research kept leading me back to RUSM. I liked that it was a fast-track program and I wanted to leap right into it and get going.

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RUSM has more than 75 affiliated teaching hospitals in the United States and their track record for residencies is outstanding. There are in fact more than 10,000 RUSM doctors working in the USA, Canada and other parts of the world. They are in every state across the US and nearly all provinces of Canada.

RUSM students begin their journey to become physicians on the school's campus in Dominica, located in the West Indies. Students complete a rigorous basic science curriculum, supported by cutting-edge instructional technology, including an anatomy and medical imaging laboratory and a simulation center where students begin to develop clinical skills. Students then complete their medical education by taking core and elective clinical rotations in U.S., Canada, and UK.

My journey was about to begin at a Caribbean medical school, in a foreign land, surrounded by mango trees and iguanas. Through the fog of memory, I could see the small sign on my bedroom door as a young girl: "Vanessa Doyle MD". This was my time!

Dr. H

As a young girl, I grew up surround by medicine. Running around the hospital wards in which both of my parents worked was part of my daily after school ritual. As far back as I can recall, whenever asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I would promptly and without hesitation reply doctor. It may seem that this was mainly due to a lack of exposure to other fields of work, or that my parents pushed me to follow in their footsteps. I didn't choose medicine for those reasons; I chose medicine because of how you can make a difference in people's lives.

My journey into medicine started by enrolling at McMaster University for a degree in Life Sciences. I was keen, ready and dedicated to achieving my childhood goal. I was determined to do well and get into medical school right after undergraduate studies. Little did I know, how hard that was actually going to be?

As the last child of three, with two older brothers who attended the same university, you can imagine how much advice and wisdom was passed down to me, solicited or otherwise. It wasn't only my brothers, but their friends would give plenty of advice on what courses to take, how to study, what to do, etc. They all had good intentions, looking after their "little sister", but as an individual who likes to try new things, this was a disastrous combination.

In my first year I was busy listening to everyone else instead of finding out what learning approach worked for me. By the time I figured it out, it was too late and my GPA had suffered. By fourth year, the fire and determination inside of me faded. I was confused and not sure if medicine was right for me. I kept telling myself that I would not get into Canadian medical schools with my GPA. Despite being involved in many extracurricular activities, having research and hospital experience, I did not have the GPA to add to the mix for a solid application.

After talking to upper-year students and mentors, I decided to do my Masters instead. I thought that this would make me a stronger applicant. With that in mind, I applied to McGill University for my Masters during my last year of undergraduate studies. All the while, several of my good friends had been accepted to Caribbean medical schools and were leaving. They kept asking me to join them and not bother with my masters. I kept telling myself no, and that with my Masters I should be able to get into a Canadian medical school.

I moved to Montreal, and started my master's program in Dental Science. I worked hard in my graduate courses and published a number of research articles. I attended conferences, being a presenter at a few, hoping that this would strengthen my application. It was that time of the year, I wrote my MCAT and prepared my applications for Canadian medical schools. I thought I would have a good chance as I was doing my Masters at a prestigious school and had publications under my name. My bubble burst when I got my rejection letters in the mail. With those letters in hand, I asked myself, now what? I don't want to continue research as a PhD candidate. How will I become a doctor? How will I do this? I talked to my friends who were studying medicine in the Caribbean and I decided to apply to the

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Caribbean schools. My only hesitation was if I would be able to return to Canada to practice. I knew a lot of friends who were completing residencies in the US but I did not want that. I wanted to return to Canada, to be close to family, friends, and for another reason. I was dating someone I really liked and he had been very supportive through this whole process, albeit it was only the beginning of my journey in medicine. I wasn't sure what was going to happen if I were to leave and not come back to Canada.

I spoke with my brother's friend who was doing her residency in Canada after studying in the Caribbean. After talking with her, I knew there was hope and I could achieve my goal. I could even come back to Canada like her and practice. Once again, I had hope and determination. I researched several schools and submitted my applications, my top choice being Ross University for its condensed time on the island and lower tuition – though nothing close to Canadian tuition fees. In December 2006, I received my acceptance letter from Ross University. As I read, "congratulations, you have been accepted", I felt relieved and ecstatic. My dream had come true and I was on my way to becoming a doctor.

Dr. R

Let's start with a bit about me pre med-school. I started my pursuit of higher education at the University of Toronto. I had turned 18 and just moved out on my own. I was excited, but, like most first-year students, mainly oblivious. I remember packing up a box of random things and driving down to campus with my mother. My parents weren't agreeable to me moving out on my own and my father decided not to be part of the move. But I was 18 and, although raised by Iranian parents, I was primarily Canadian and needed to release myself from the tight leash that had been imposed on me.

So, my first two years of undergrad were focused on getting to know myself and the world around me. I learnt basic survival skills, explored downtown Toronto and relished in the idea of going out without a curfew. But all of this soul-searching wasn't without affect on my studies. I was generally missing-in-action with anything related to

classes and academics. It wasn't that I didn't want to learn in class, but I was far too busy learning from the new world around me.

The affect on my academic performance was distressing because I knew I wanted to be a physician. By the time my third-year rolled around, I got myself in check and became the same "little miss nerd" that I was in high school. By this point it was too late. Applying for medical school is a rigorous, unforgiving and blind process where grades from all four years are taken into account. I did well in my third and fourth years. In fact, I did so well that my overall GPA was 3.4/4 after being barely a 2.0 in the first two years! With 14 medical schools in Canada and only a handful of them accepting out-of-province students, thousands of applicants (national and international), and many applicants with masters and PhDs, I decided to not apply to medical school during my fourth year of undergrad. I knew that a 3.4 GPA was not enough to even get me an interview.

Instead, I did what I always dreamed of doing: I travel! I ventured out of Thornhill, Ontario (a suburb North of Toronto) and pranced around the world. It was during my globetrotting that more soul-searching occurred and the decision that I needed to get out. Not just move out of my parent's home, but also I needed to leave the country altogether. I decided to apply for my Masters degree. In Canada this is a natural reflex for poor, unwilling biology majors after their dreams of medical school have been crushed. So, I applied all over Europe and Australia.

During this time, the light of medicine was still burning somewhere in my mind. I continued to dream of someday becoming an MD. I knew that as a physician I could help people, travel, have a stable life and explore science. My plans were to finish my Masters Degree and then move on to medicine, but I wasn't sure when or how.

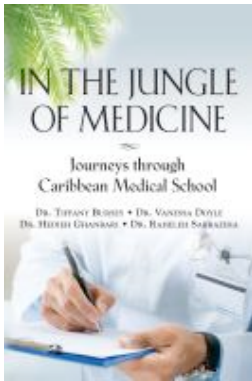
That is when my friend appeared. We first met in Biology 151 in Convocation Hall on U of T campus; a hall that wedged over 1500 students in lecture. A class in "Con Hall" meant a professor that you never met and whose silhouette you could barely make out as he lectured somewhere in the distance. My friend and I would chat about our dreams of travel, medicine and of the constraints U of T had

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placed on our young souls. I recall stories of my friend's uncle who was a physician in Washington, DC. Far off in America, the land of dreams. And he trained in the Caribbean! He trained medicine in the Caribbean. How was that so?

One day my friend was gone. He disappeared without a trace. It was just me again and "the machine". Downtown Toronto had lost its spunk. I was bored and felt my life was not going in the direction I had hoped it would. It was around this time that I received acceptance to the Masters in Evolutionary Biology program in England and Australia. I was going to move after debating between the beaches of Australia or the sophistication of London. A part of me was excited, but my soul still felt disappointed. And then he reappeared. It turns out, my friend had left us to begin medical school in the Caribbean. When we finally met again, he showed up to my door wearing shorts, a tan and a smile. He didn't even let me consider giving up my dream. "Come to the Caribbean with me Rah," he held out his hand. "We can live our dreams!" And that is how I ended up finally pursuing the one thing I knew I wanted for so long.





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