What motivates some people to pursue medicine or leave it? What happens to the medical student who dreads the prospect of a doctor’s responsibility or the junior doctor who took maternity leave and was no longer respected professionally? What about the international medical graduate who is repeatedly declined by the training programme of their choice or the registrar who believes they have chosen the wrong specialty for themselves? These are just some of the individuals that Dr Caroline Elton has encountered in 20 years of working with students and doctors in the United Kingdom National Health Service (NHS). Dr Elton shares their powerful stories and more in her book Also Human: The Inner Lives of Doctors, so future students and clinicians can learn from them.

By virtue of her role as an occupational psychologist to NHS staff, Dr Elton is able to experience the medical profession intimately while remaining an objective outsider. After spending much of her professional life offering career support, counselling, and evaluating clinical education, this book frequently touches on strategies for vocational problem-solving. However, Dr Elton predominantly provides insights into the very human individuals that make up the workforce.

Also Human handles delicate topics with consideration while offering a distinctly psychological perspective to many of the concepts we are taught in medical school. One such discussion is about empathy and the relationship not just between clinician and patient, but also between clinician colleagues. Dr Elton delves into psychological theory about the roots of human empathy in our childhood attachments to make sense of a consultant who treats a newly immigrated junior doctor on her team with disregard, sending her to certify a death by herself with little instruction.

Dr Elton also describes the decline in empathy experienced by those in medicine, as they progress through training, from the combination of stressors in their environment. As such, the mental health of medical students and doctors is a recurring theme throughout the book. The issue of transitions is an area where Dr Elton feels the medical system often fails its doctors and leaves them vulnerable. An example of a poorly managed transition, such as the transformation from student to doctor, is illustrated in the harrowing story of a doctor put in charge of an entire ward by herself on her first day as a graduate. In this vignette, Dr Elton also discusses the New Zealand model of having final year medical students become Trainee Interns as a better way to bridge the gap than the more abrupt NHS transition of clinical student to doctor.

Amongst the many meaningful conversations that Also Human offers, a large proportion are those that deal with discrimination in the workforce. The challenges of being female in certain specialties and the biases against women who wish to take time out of their careers for their families are portrayed through the stories of several doctors. Dr Elton describes the attrition of female doctors from hospital roles in this environment as “leaky pipes” and she discusses in-depth how the culture of discrimination also extends to students and doctors who fall into minority ethnic groups. This is a topic that Dr Elton illustrates with a significant body of research and personal stories to leave the reader in no doubt how important this issue is. She also goes to great lengths to demonstrate how strongly embedded this culture of discrimination is around the world. Building the awareness and advocacy needed to tackle these pervasive issues as the pipeline flows is the only way to create a culture shift away from discrimination, and this is relevant to all medical students, including those in New Zealand.

This collection of narratives is a window into the often-hidden side of practising medicine that we may not encounter as students. Dr Elton’s clear writing style, varied delivery, and the connection to honest human experience make this a compelling text to reflect on for both pre-clinical and clinical students. Anyone who wishes to gain insight not only into the challenges of a medical career, but also the diversity of medical systems internationally and the experience of navigating career change in medicine, would enjoy this book.

References

About the author
Uma is a fourth-year medical student at the University of Auckland, based at North Shore Hospital this year. She is passionate about health advocacy and the intersection between medicine and technology.

Conflict of interest
Uma is a current peer reviewer for the NZMSJ. This article has gone through a double-blinded peer review process applied to all articles submitted to the NZMSJ, and has been accepted after achieving the standard required for publication. The author has no other conflict of interest to declare.

Also human: The inner lives of doctors
by Caroline Elton

Uma Sreedhar