

Hopefully, as recruitment for our future doctors increases, so will our ability to be fair and consistent in the valuation of work experience, and to be widely supportive of students who seek such experience.

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An unexpected day in the mountains

Friday afternoon being my study time, I was contemplating the options for a productive culmination to the day over lunch in the surgery. Then the phone rang, 'It's Mike from the rescue team. Are you free?' Around 11.30 that morning, an aeroplane had disappeared from radar over a remote tract of land, north-west of Ben Wyvis. It was a scheduled postal service returning to Inverness, with only the pilot onboard. Dundonnell Mountain Rescue Team are not a busy team, but we cover a vast area including some of the most isolated mountain terrain in the British Isles. At the time of the phonecall, my car was having its MOT, but I was able to collect it by early afternoon to drive out west and join in the search.

Several team members were already on the hill, and had been joined by RAF and Coastguard helicopters. The helicopters can be useful when visibility is good, but for such conditions as often prevail in the Scottish mountains, much ground must be covered by foot. The clouds were breaking slightly as the afternoon grew late, but no sign of the plane had been traced. A number of reports came in from stalkers and fishermen of an explosion, or a thud, but it was difficult to localise the noise.

There was little hope of finding anything once darkness set in, so we retired to our beds in preparation for a full scale search at first light. While I was driving home, late in the evening, a voice on the radio revealed the identity of the pilot and a few other pieces of information about him. The poignancy of the occasion had set in by the time I prepared my lunch for a full day on the hill.

By morning, the assembled search party consisted of four civilian mountain rescue teams, two RAF mountain rescue teams and two helicopters. Equipped with radio communication and other emergency gear, each person was one vital element in a coordinated search that combed an area bigger than the English Lake District. Along with five other members of the Dundonnell team, I was

initially dropped by helicopter to scour a section of mountain plateau which was encircled by low cloud.

The crash site was located at 1430 hours by another party from our team. We listened in silence as the grid reference and a description of the scene were transmitted in subdued tones. A rainbow formed, then faded, in a glen to the east. After crossing 4 kilometres of peat hags, my party arrived on scene about an hour later. I prefer not to describe what was found in any detail, except that my presence satisfied the routine formality of confirming death. Later, the statement to the press simply read that we had 'recovered the pilot's body'.

Mountain rescue teams in the UK are all voluntary organisations. Nevertheless (perhaps predictably?), the commitment, dedication and professional approach of the majority of volunteers is second to none. They are people with humility, who acknowledge human vulnerability. They have great respect for the power of nature and are often witness to its ultimate dominance over the fragility of life. They understand risk, think calmly under pressure and have a structured approach to solving problems. Interdependence and teamwork are fundamental to an effective search or rescue effort. In summary, the personal attributes required in mountain rescue are not much different to those that are important in general practice.

Many weeks have passed since this particular event, but it seems in a small way to have affected my daily thoughts and actions. I feel more confident when faced with problems that are solvable, and I feel more human when faced with those that aren't. When I am in the mountains, the rocks, sun, rain, clouds and wind all seem more real and tangible than the ordinary concerns and worries of daily existence, and it is satisfying for former stressful pre-occupations to be seen in a new light and brushed aside as inconsequential. I think that writing about it has helped me too.