

How leaving the career I'd trained for shattered my glass ceiling

Dr Owain Rhys Hughes is CEO and founder of Cinapsis: a healthtech company that's transforming patient referrals and tackling NHS waiting times by giving primary care clinicians immediate access to specialist advice. Dr Hughes is a surgeon by training and shared his journey with Maddyness.

I've never been a fan of the idea of 'potential': a metaphorical capacity for success that's predetermined in each of us. My preferred vision of success has no limits, growing with every idea, skill and small victory gained. But the concept of a glass ceiling?

I've met so many people who live under theirs, unable to see the opportunities they're missing. Working in the same field for too long can make you feel like a one-trick pony; but from what I've observed, allowing the proverbial glass ceiling to set you boundaries will only limit your capacity to achieve.

The trajectory of my career has taught me that you should never, ever listen to people who try to tell you to stay in your lane. Trying something new can unlock doors you never even knew existed.

As a qualified surgeon, my career was 18 years' of commitment in the making. Like most other medics, I'd set out with a very clear goal from the moment I

applied to university: I wanted to fix things. Medicine seemed like the most obvious way to achieve this, but it's notoriously difficult to change direction once you're on this path. Not to mention the limited options once you qualify.

You might choose paediatrics over General Practice, but it's always assumed you'll stay on the front line for the best part of your career. Supervisors can also be actively disparaging should you express an ambition to shake up the status quo. For this reason, despite the respectability and sense of fulfilment, a career in medicine can sometimes feel stifling.

Going into medicine, we're all aware that long and unpredictable shifts are part and parcel of the job. But the drive to have an impact doesn't make the relentlessness of the work any easier, and the same can be said for professionals in many other fields.

It's unsurprising that those who take up a trade or vocation can end up feeling as though this thing they've trained for is all they can do. It's hard to accept that there might be more to life. When you've spent years studying such a specific subject, and hours on the job honing your skills, it's inevitable to accrue a sense of duty and obligation that can cloud any greater ambitions.

But having borne witness to numerous cases of tunnel vision throughout my career, I felt determined never to set myself limits. Over the last three years, I have learnt that choosing to tread a different path can bring you closer to meeting your goals. Like I said, I went into medicine because I wanted to fix problems. In 2018, after 18 years in the game, I handed in my stethoscope to solve a significant one: the NHS' broken referrals system.

I loved practising surgery and am proud of what I achieved, but years in the system brought the pitfalls of an outdated referral management process sharply into focus. I noticed how precious resources were being wasted through unnecessary appointments that could easily be avoided with closer communication between primary and secondary care.

So I built a product called Cinapsis that breaks down silos between these teams; GPs, paramedics and community nurses can share details of a patient's condition with a local specialist in real-time, and make a more informed call on the best course of action. In the majority of cases, there's another service – perhaps in the community – that's more appropriate than an outpatient appointment in 8 weeks' time.

Once I'd realised that smarter triaging led by stronger communication could solve a problem I'd encountered so often, I felt driven to do something about it. But saying goodbye to surgery was far from easy. I was leaving a profession I'd dedicated my life to – and a job I really loved.

I'd set expectations for myself and for others and had earned respect and credibility for the work I'd done. I had to prepare to answer difficult questions – from colleagues, friends, family and even complete strangers – about why I was leaving this behind.

But I preferred to think that I was actually moving on. I had no idea whether Cinapsis would work, whether it would make money or even whether I'd enjoy this totally new type of role. But I knew it was worth the risk, as I had an opportunity to overhaul a system that simply wasn't working and have a huge positive impact on patients and NHS staff. I had a chance to solve a really important problem with a solution that could be used for many years to come.

I've never looked back. Fixing a different kind of problem became my goal and I've never regretted pursuing it. The world of healthtech is a far cry from life as a surgeon, but I enjoy embracing the new set of skills and challenges that practising medicine didn't give me the opportunity to explore.

I've built a talented and dedicated team and helped thousands of patients access better care, faster. I've gained a whole new set of skills and discovered a different way to have an impact. I thought I'd realised my goals by becoming a surgeon, but venturing into the world of tech showed me how much more I was capable of.

My tech solution was borne out of skills I'd accrued over many years inside the NHS. If it wasn't for the unique insights my career and colleagues in medicine afforded me, I wouldn't have spotted the gap that Cinapsis now fills. But every great idea comes from somewhere; more often than not a series of experiences that serve to shift your perspective. Seeing colleagues living under their glass ceilings – and expecting me to do the same – was what prompted me to shatter mine.

I love being a surgeon. If I hadn't taken this path, I wouldn't be where I am today. But the great thing about leaving a career you've trained for is that you can always return to it down the line if you want to. So why not try something new, if you have the drive? I have no idea what happens when you've reached your 'full potential'. But I do know that once you're rid of the glass ceiling that's limiting your growth, there's no knowing where you will go and what you will achieve.

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