How did you get interested in space medicine?
I suppose I was a bit of a space geek when I was young. Seeing Helen Sharman (the first British woman astronaut) fly on a mission to the MIR space station really captured my imagination. So, when I was 13, I got in contact with the UK space school and found out they were running a trip to Moscow. At first they said I was too young to go but, after some persistence, they gave in and I joined the British delegation. Visiting the Star City cosmonauts’ training centre was an amazing experience, and I’ve done something space-related every year since then.

How did the interest in space lead to space medicine?
Initially I wanted to do space physics but on a trip to NASA one year someone said to me, “Physicists are ten a penny. The best way to get involved is to do medicine, because they know so little about the effects of microgravity on the body.” Medicine probably suited my personality more than physics so I applied for a place at Aberdeen University to study medicine. Now I’m glad I took this route because I enjoy hospital medicine and love being a doctor. Space medicine has got so many potential applications down here—it just involves a bit of lateral thinking.

Where has this interest in space taken you?
The following two years I went to Korea and Japan with the space school. Then I decided to branch out a little and wrote to the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). I was almost 15 at the time and had nothing to put on my CV except “piano player.” Incredibly, they wrote back and organised a two-week programme of activities around Mission Control and the Johnson Space Center (KSC). Alyson graduated from Aberdeen University in 2002 and is currently working as a senior house officer in cardiology at Monklands Hospital in Airdrie, Scotland. She also teaches undergraduates and school pupils about space and space medicine and organised the first “UK Space Medicine Day” held recently in Leicester.

What is it that makes you so passionate about space medicine?
It’s a fascinating branch of medicine; it’s new and challenging and it’s expanding quickly. We really do know so little about it all. It highlights how much we don’t understand about the body back on earth. For example, the mechanisms of orthostatic intolerance are not fully understood. This is a very common and debilitating problem for astronauts on return from space flight. In trying to understand the mechanisms in space, we are unravelling the physiology of the body back on Earth.

What advice have you got for others based on your experience?
It’s difficult to get into space medicine as a Brit, because there’s no United Kingdom space medicine opportunities council. There are opportunities, though, including the space medicine module at University College London (see further information). Most of what I’ve done was down to making my own opportunities and writing to people. I would advise anyone interested in space medicine not to be put off if they feel they’re not getting anywhere. Just keep knocking on people’s doors until they find a research group or someone willing to help.

Further Information
The UCL masters course in Human Performance under Extreme Conditions (with space medicine as one of the modules) starts in September 2005. For more details contact Julie Sladden psychiatrist and freelance medical journalist Leicester julie.sladden@doctors.org.uk

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