

THE SWITCH

From urologist to playwright

Professor of surgery at the University of Sydney Mohamed Khadra may be multitasked but he's very clear on his primary skill set.

"First and foremost, I'm a surgeon," he says. "My earliest memories were operating on my teddy bear."

As a urologist, he deals with kidneys, bladders and prostates and has long been used to explaining to people what he does.

"When I told mum I was going to be a urologist, she said, 'Ah, neurologist, very good,'" noting that she fell silent when he clarified his actual specialty of choice.

"Urology seemed to be the specialty where you could do the most immediate good. If someone comes in with kidney cancer, you can 'heal with steel,'" he says.

Although Khadra sees his primary responsibility as treating his patients at Nepean Hospital in Sydney's west, his medical work goes beyond the operating theatre.

"Nepean is one of the clinical schools of the University of Sydney; it's rapidly becoming one of their larger schools in terms of student numbers," he says. "Each week, I spend a few days at hospital and a couple at university but a lot of it overlaps," he says, noting that today's medical students spend large periods observing the hospital environment, rather than simply poring over textbooks.

As a teacher of the next generation, Khadra works hard to dispel the stereotype of the gruff surgeon. "Communication is really a key part of being a surgeon," he says. "You also need to be a good health advocate and have... a certain amount of humility."

Khadra's communication skills

have served him well. Despite a busy full-time load, his week includes regular switches to his second career, that of an author and playwright. A 2007 discussion with one of his patients, an author, led to an introduction to a literary agent after Khadra said he'd always wanted to write.

"[My patient] set me up with a meeting, so I thought I'd better write something," he says with a laugh. The result was his first book, the surgical memoir *Making the Cut*. Its success led to *The Patient*, about the life of a terminally ill cancer patient, followed by *Terminal Decline* (all by Random House), an investigation of Australia's healthcare system. Along the way, Khadra managed to entice Australia's most famous playwright, David Williamson, to collaborate on a play about end-of-life issues.

"It's about having something you want to share with humanity," he says of his passion for writing. "The whole thing gets conjured up within my brain and I can almost see my whole book [in my head]. Then it's just got to be typed."

It does mean Khadra has very little downtime. While he prioritises time with his children, he cuts out other non-essentials.

The financial disparity between his two worlds is obvious.

"Surgeons are very decently rewarded [but] in Australia, I think there are only a handful of writers who earn enough money from writing to live," he says. Luckily, Khadra writes for love. "I'm so incredibly grateful that I've had three books and the play published. I feel like I have won the lottery over and over."

SUE WHITE



THEN

NOW

SALARY About \$140,000 from the University of Sydney, plus about \$60,000 from Nepean Hospital.

WORK-LIFE BALANCE "There's no question one of the major struggles as a surgeon is maintaining work-life balance. Patients come first, so there's no such thing as being on days off."

HOURS Up to 80 hours a week including surgery, university and research.



Quite an operation... Mohamed Khadra is a surgeon as well as an author and playwright. Photo: Domino Postiglione (top); Dianne Watson (above)

SALARY "You make 10 per cent of sales as an author. If you sell 5000 books, which is seen as an absolute bestseller in Australia, it's about \$15,000 a title. That would be a really good result."

WORK-LIFE BALANCE "My wife reckons she read a book on our last week-long holiday but I wrote a book!"

HOURS "I'm constantly thinking about writing. The typing is the final bit."

MISS "There's no question I'd miss surgery if I left."

CHALLENGES "The Australian publishing industry is still very Britain and US-centred. There are some Nobel Prize-winning novels sitting in the bin of publishers around Australia."

LINKS

At Any Cost will be previewed at the Noosa Longweekend Festival (June 17-26) ahead of its official premiere in Sydney in July. noosalongweekend.com

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