

**The Northern Echo**  
The North's campaigning newspaper

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## COMMENT

# Funding the war on drugs

ALMOST every day, *The Northern Echo* carries reports of court cases and inquests where, sadly, drugs are a significant factor.

Whether it is a charge of possession, a defence solicitor citing drug debt as the reason for a crime, or a life cut short by addiction, the impact of drugs on individuals, families and communities is all too clear.

The Government's first drugs strategy in seven years is an effort to tackle this devastation.

The plan has attracted criticism from campaigners for not proposing to decriminalise users, with Durham Police and Crime Commissioner Ron Hogg, a long-time advocate of drug policy reform, calling this "fundamentally disappointing".

The strategy has, however, been praised in some quarters for its focus on recovery, tying in the crucial aspects of housing, employment and mental health support as part of a long-term approach to help addicts turn their lives around. Support for prison officers to play a bigger role in the recovery of drug offenders is also welcome.

However sensible and well received these proposals might be, though, their success or otherwise depends in large part on local authorities, health trusts and the Prison Service.

Many local authorities are already struggling to fulfil their statutory duties after years of austerity. The budgetary pressures on health trusts are well documented, and asking the over-stretched workers of the Prison Service to help deliver extra support on such a complex issue sounds optimistic.

If these aspects of the strategy are to make any difference at all, funding of the various agencies working directly with vulnerable people taking their first steps toward recovery needs addressing as a matter of urgency.

**What do you think?**  
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**QUALITY**

If you have any comments or suggestions about the print quality of today's copy of **The Northern Echo**, please contact our customer care department on 01325-505151.



**CRADLE:** Dr Zak Uddin's debut novel, above, focuses on the development of a junior doctor, and the challenges he faces on the NHS frontline

# What's up doc?

**F**ROM *Cradle to Grave*, the title of Dr Zak Uddin's first novel, is the motto of the NHS at its inception in 1948. He chose it because the book's main protagonist is a junior doctor and it felt a fitting name for a story about the birth of a medical career.

The book tells the tale of Jack, a newly qualified junior doctor in his first six months after medical school, working in a sleepy district general hospital where he initially struggles to perfect his skills.

As he learns the ropes, he falls for a young staff nurse, and is also taken under the wing of a senior surgeon, who recognises his interest in surgery.

The novel addresses common issues encountered by newly qualified doctors, and gives a taste of some of the memorable conversations with patients that can test the limits of a doctor's abilities.

Does Jack possess the tact and sensitivity to discuss the thorny issue of sexual activity with a 14-year-old girl in A&E with abdominal pain, who may have an ectopic pregnancy, while the girl's mother is still in the room?

Can he support a mother of two young children, not yet 40, who has been diagnosed with terminal cancer?

The book hinges on one crucial but avoidable oversight, at a point where Jack has become proficient enough to not be excused such a mistake, but at that tricky line where confidence often rubs shoulders with arrogance. Will it end Jack's career before it has even really begun?

"In writing the book, I wanted to convey more of the emotions I felt as a newly qualified doctor," says Zak, who has also written on a variety of medical topics for *The Northern Echo*. "I hoped it would be useful if the reader could see that often a junior doctor is as worried about an encounter as the patient is.

"I had written this book five years ago and then it languished in a file whilst I completed my GP training, but having been motivated by my success with the health articles, and also with no further exams left, I



Dr Zak Uddin, left, North-East GP and medical writer, tell **Hannah Chapman** about his debut novel – his first foray into fiction

felt it would be a good time to try and get the manuscript published."

Zak initially studied at the University of Manchester, and after house jobs, did basic surgical training at The James Cook University Hospital, in Middlesbrough, before going onto higher level surgical training in Blackpool and Leeds.

It was while in Leeds that he realised his skills lay elsewhere.

He says: "Initially I was very apprehensive and indeed reluctant about changing to General Practice, but having had supportive and enthusiastic teachers, I can honestly say it is the best thing I have done in my career."

**T**HE book draws heavily on his experiences in his first six months after medical school, but he is keen to stress that none of the characters are based on specific individuals.

"At that time I was extremely wet behind the ears, but also a blank canvas upon which experiences were placed which ultimately shaped the doctor and to some extent the person I am today," he says.

"Largely it is difficult to make up realistic scenarios unless you have either encountered them personally, or been involved in some capacity."

As well as portraying the dilemmas faced

by junior doctors fresh out of medical school, Zak also hopes the book will demonstrate the pressure newly qualified doctors are under.

He says: "I wanted the reader to be able to see some of the situations that junior doctors face, both good and bad, on a day to day basis.

"I still feel medicine is an extremely rewarding career. You have an insight into the lives of people who are ultimately strangers, but who trust you because of who you are.

"Small acts can often have large positive effects in terms of healthcare.

"At the same time not everyone with an illness will have a successful outcome sadly, and I think these are the times that junior doctors struggle emotionally.

"Thankfully there are usually many senior professionals, both doctors and nurses, who are more than happy to sit you down and lend a supportive ear, or a shoulder to cry on if needed."

He adds: "I hope that anyone who reads *From Cradle to Grave* derives as much pleasure as I did in writing it."

■ **From Cradle to Grave** by Dr Zak Uddin is available now on Amazon. For more information see [doctorzak.co.uk](http://doctorzak.co.uk) or [@AskDoctorZak](https://twitter.com/AskDoctorZak) on Twitter.

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