

# Like a red flag to a Bull

*Just how does a medic make the break into television? MS spoke to Dr David Bull to find out.*



Luke Das  
Staff Writer

WALKING home from school was never a pleasant experience. Battling the abrasive itch of that bothersome blazer whilst being weighed down by several textbooks was all I needed after a hard day's graft. After collapsing in a heap through my front door, nothing would be more satisfying than subjecting myself to some truly mind-numbing television. And following each session of cartoons, the only way to get those intellectual juices flowing again

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would be to tune into Newsround. Although the presenters often sported retina-assaulting cardigans, the factual delivery of the programme remained unparalleled; and to this day I watch the programme to keep up with topical issues. After all, there aren't many shows that can distil matters such as civil war or global warming down to a couple of minutes' explanation, especially for a young target audience.

At the end of the show, my mum would spend a good half an hour trying to wrestle the remote control away from me, insisting that I would never get into medical school if I didn't do my chemistry homework. Ten years on, I've learned that mum is always right; and today I am glad to be able to sit as a medical student interviewing Dr David Bull, the UK's first children's television doctor and the definitive presenter of Newsround.

Whilst we sit comfortably in a dedicated games room (complete with table football), Bull's employees at Incredibull Ideas diligently mill around in the surrounding rooms like bees in a hive. The headquarters of the events and PR empire are situated at London Bridge as an open-plan office space, with most of the rooms fronted with glass to allow everybody to see

everybody else. Located at the core of the office is a rather impressive bar. Since it is only just after lunchtime it is still (disappointingly) only serving non-alcoholic beverages, but Dr Bull is keen to point out that come Friday evening his employees are encouraged to drink and be merry at this watering-hole. I suddenly feel a tad out of place in my shirt and tie, as I realise all the staff are slouching around in jeans and t-shirts whilst slurping on their complimentary coffee and tucking into a selection of pastries. It seems working for Incredibull Ideas is not without its perks.

Dr Bull himself is dressed in a white polo shirt with a casually raised collar and smart denim jeans. His mop of ornately sculpted hair and toothpaste advert grin are just as I remember them from television, and he sits in great anticipation of the first question. Whilst I resort to the usual "testing, one-two-three" to sound-check my Dictaphone, he proudly declares, "I am Dr David Bull, doctor, broadcaster, events manager and writer," in the hope that I won't omit a role from his repertoire.

I open with a question begging to be asked. "Our generation will remember Newsround because we grew up with it. And I will always remember my mum saying, 'he's probably not a real doctor - he's just someone they've stuck on the telly.'" Can you confirm to our readers (and my mum) that you are actually a qualified doctor?"

"I am a real doctor," he laughs. "I qualified from St Mary's [now Imperial], the greatest medical school in London in 1993. I will be a doctor until I drop dead!" Bull hastens to tack some wisdom on to this answer. "The medical training you receive as a student will change you as a person. I am always told in television, and everything that I do, that I think like a doctor. I am very logical about my approach to problems and I also tend to see the glass as 'half full', which I think is important. So of course I am a doctor."

Many of Dr Bull's friends are conventional medics and surgeons, whom he met during six years of medical school. Like any connection at medical

school, these affinities were spawned from a combination of intense medical training and numerous nights of drunken debauchery. He recalls his days as a medical student fondly, and is willing to share several mischievous events that make our generation seem tame in comparison.

"We had a ball!" he exclaims, still laughing. "We did the obligatory drinking until you fall over, and of course the treasure hunt game." I snigger as I wonder how anybody could do better than the famed road-cone theft of today's generation. Bull continues. "I vividly remember a rival team once snagging a pneumatic drill and challenging us to outdo them. One of the things on the list was a mounted policeman, and I knew that our bar was up some steps so getting a horse up them would be tricky (the rules were that the snagged item had to enter the bar). So I found two policemen and asked one to give the other a piggy back into the bar!" My sniggers are stifled by sheer awe.

Moving onto the state of medical education today, Dr Bull is keen to share his opinions. "It is ridiculous that dissection is being phased out," he says, and I get the impression his concern isn't just for the educational value. "Every Tuesday we had a viva on what you had learned that week. We had to stand up in our white coats while we were being

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questioned around the body. It was always funny to take bits of the fascia and put it in the pocket of the person standing up so that when they put their hands in their pockets they would..." he pauses. "Of course that would never be allowed these days. I'm not sure I can even repeat a lot of what we used to do." At this point I assure my interviewee that the fine (autonomous) publication that is Medical Student would have no qualms about printing his



I don't Bullieve it: Luke meets the man himself

stories. He goes on. "When we got to the brain, for example, we had saw the head off and then pull the brain out and remove the neural attachments. We always turned it into a race, as was the tradition at Mary's." But aside from the fun and games, Dr Bull was keen to make it clear that a great deal of gratitude was paid to those who donated their bodies, and denies any disrespect. "It was all in good humour, and I'm sure the people that donated their bodies would probably have found it humorous as well."

Before embarking on a television career, Bull spent a great deal of time as a cog in the vast machine of the NHS. Although admittedly "quite torn" about his career decisions, he loved wielding the power to make people better. "Once when I was the A&E SHO we were resuscitating a very ill man and the team wanted to stop. But I insisted on carrying on - you get quite big-headed about these things - and the patient eventually came round, much to everyone's surprise. About three months later a well-dressed man appeared in the department and introduced himself as that patient, and gave me a pen engraved with my name. It was amazing to realise that I had had such an impact on someone's life."

But with the impact comes hospital politics, which Bull has much to say about. "The NHS is a bureaucratic, inefficient, and ridiculous system, managed by morons who don't know what they are doing. I

remember being in a lift once at one particular hospital and overhearing a conversation between managers going along the lines of: "This hospital is running well, but it would run so much more efficiently if there weren't any patients."

So just how did Dr Bull man-

*"The agent asked me why she would want a doctor in television. I said to her, 'Because if you don't you'll regret it. I'm the next big thing.'"*

age to escape the medical rat race and break into television? "I had no money as a student or junior doctor. I owed the bank tens of thousands of pounds, and started modelling to earn some cash. On my trail of horrible, horrible jobs I stumbled upon a modelling agency that suggested I make a show reel (TV equivalent of a CV) and come back to be introduced to an agent. So I went to meet this potential agent, a smart woman with big hair, dripping in jewellery, who asked me, "Why would I want to be your agent? Why would I want a doctor in television?" And I don't know where my line came from, but I said to her, "Because if you don't you'll regret it. I'm the next big thing." She sat back and said, "You have 15 minutes to convince me. Go!"

His legendary role as a presenter of Newsround was not a post that was advertised, and took a lot of convincing by his agent to bag. Bull himself

found the switch from wards to studios demanding, and found the requirements of a children's presenter unfamiliar and daunting. "The frustrating thing was having to simplify and condense everything down. When talking about hay fever for example, there's no time to go into IgE and mast cell degranulation. You have 1 minute 20 seconds to convey the main points about hay fever to the nation's children."

Dr Bull's next big break was being invited to front Watchdog Healthcheck after meeting Anne Robinson, who was to become Bull's mentor in the television industry. Now with several shows under his belt, Dr Bull has come a long way in the industry, and recently picked up a Royal Television Society Award for his work in children's television. Radio is something he hopes to explore next, and Magic FM auditioned him just days before our interview. Not a bad CV for a 36-year-old.

People are often quick to assume that the work Dr Bull does has little clinical relevance, but Dr Bull is ready with an answer to that. "One of my mates, a consultant breast surgeon, called me the other day and asked when I would "get a proper job and stop messing about on TV." I asked him how many people he'd seen in clinic that day, which was about 20. My reply was, "Well I've just seen 5 million and if just 1 per cent of those people take on board what I have just said, it's going to have a huge impact."