

Relative Values

The sexiest doctors on TV, Chris and Xand van Tulleken, 37, are identical twins. They admit it isn't always a blessing. Interviews by *Caroline Scott*. Photograph by *Charlie Clift*

Xand

Chris and I yell at each other every day. At least half of our phone calls end with one of us hanging up in anger. If it's me, I'll phone back 30 seconds later, going: "I'm sorry." At which point he'll be so angry, he'll hang up. We'll do this five or six times in a row, because it doesn't matter — we're bound together for life to care about each other.

Both our parents are Canadian; Dad was a designer, Mum ran her own publishing company. Mum was the main breadwinner and it was she who pushed us along — not in a hothouse way, but by not setting limits [both boys went to the independent King's College School in Wimbledon]. She always thought we could do a bit better.

Chris is younger than me by seven minutes, but he drags me forward. It was Chris who cooked up the idea that we should both go



to medical school. We just thought it would be really smart to do the same thing. It meant we could be study partners through school, and then again when we went to Oxford. We saw it as a way of doubling our net worth. Twins who compete are insane — I'll never beat Chris by more than 1%.

Being a twin is being engaged in a constant inquiry about who you are. If you're an identical twin, you see a better version of yourself every day. Chris is married to a beautiful woman, he has a great job, a great house. And because he's my twin, I think: "I can be him. I can have his life, too."

My life's been more complicated. After Oxford, I went to Harvard on a Fulbright scholarship in 2008. My son, Julian, was born in February 2009 after a brief relationship. In America, people say you eat your problems. That's what I did. I was trying to process the fact that I was going to be a dad and was away from Chris for the first time. As a result, I got absurdly fat — 19 stone.

Chris was very upset, not just because I was unhappy, but because I was his fat ambassador, out in the world looking like a fat version of him. It took years to lose the weight and Chris was so mean about it. He tried to help, but it just made me crazily angry.

Our friends would say I'm the more relaxed twin. I think Chris is more ambitious and tenacious than me. After Oxford, we both went to the School of Tropical Medicine, then I went to work in the refugee camps in Darfur and Chris went on an expedition to Greenland.

I now work in humanitarian aid in New York, while Chris works as an infectious-diseases registrar. He's also doing a PhD. I live in New York to be nearer my son, but the TV part of my job is in London.

We love doing TV together, especially children's programmes. Operation Ouch! is great because we're teaching kids about the human body and having lots of fun — how many 37-year-olds get to spend a few weeks a year making fart jokes with their brother?

The argument we have at least once a week is over whether it's worth trying to change someone. I'm in a constant state of cynicism that Chris hauls me out of, and he's in a constant state of optimism that I drag him down from. That's the lovely tension in our existences.

All I really want, though, is for Chris to be happy, and I know that's all he wants for me.

Chris

Anyone who has known us will tell you I'm the evil twin — the slightly more calculating one, the more motivated, the less likeable one. Xand, on the other hand, is so warm, people gravitate towards him. It's fine, honestly. If you have an identical twin, you want them to be the best possible version of you.

I'm pretty sure I need him much more than he needs me. A lack of certainty propels me through life, and Xand gives me the mental tools to deal with it. If he says he defers to me, he's f***** wrong. He won't listen to anything I say.

He probably said we argue



FIERY RELATIONS Xand (left) and his twin at Chris's north London home. Below left: Chris gunkns his brother. Right: a young Chris (left) and Xand in the early 1980s

Love

DOUBLE CLIFT FOR THE SUNDAY TIMES MAGAZINE



violently every day. It's true, but we're trying to do it less because it's so dysfunctional, so unprofessional. But there's no jeopardy: he won't leave, I won't leave, so we can say anything. It can be horrible and offensive. But it doesn't matter.

All the best things about me, I stole from him. Our medical degree was conventional training. But he has also got this weird classical education that's led him to be a humanitarian academic. We now both sit on the board of the charity Doctors of the World UK.

"He probably said we argue violently every day. It's true. It can be horrible and offensive"

The nature of being identical means we're forever being brought together by our similarities. If one wanted to do something different, the other would go: "He shouldn't be doing that, or I should be doing it, too." I compete with our younger brother, Jonathan, but not with Xand. His successes are mine; we bask in each other's glories.

Equally, his failures are my failures, and that's more significant, because seeing him screw up is awful. When he was fat, I thought he looked ridiculous. There was a professional argument. "You're a TV doctor, you can't be fat." But really it was an emotional response. It's a taboo we still don't talk about.

If you spent a week with us, you would think: "Those van Tulleken brothers don't get along at all!" In truth, it's all noise. When I fight with Xand, I am fighting with myself. Both of us feel 100%

STRANGE HABITS

Chris on Xand He's a terrible glutton, but then so am I. He eats Chinese food alone. He can't tell I'm also in a Chinese restaurant when I call to tell him off, as the music at the one he goes to in New York is louder than Ba Shan, my regular in London

Xand on Chris Like me, his weird quirk is eating alone in Chinese restaurants



happier and safer when the other is in the room. When Xand isn't around, I'm only half-present. The fact is, if you haven't met Xand, you haven't really met me ■ *Frontline Doctors: Winter Migrant Crisis is available on BBC iPlayer. Operation Ouch! is on CBBC. Chris van Tulleken also co-presents How to Stay Young, on BBC1 on April 7 and 14 at 9pm*