A life in academe

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Fewer graduates in medicine than previously are training to join the ranks of clinician-scientists that elite body of physicians who succeed in combining a scientific career with responsibilities for patient care, teaching and administration. In part this reflects the difficulty of juggling a multiplicity of responsibilities.

At the 1999 annual meeting of the Canadian Society for Clinical Investigation, a workshop was held on personal development. One of the keynote speakers was the past president of the CSIC, Dr. Jean Gray. Dr. Gray is an accomplished scientist, clinician, teacher and administrator who has made an indelible impression on the Canadian academic medical scene. In the hope that her experience and wisdom will encourage and foster the personal and professional development of young investigators, we have asked her to share her thoughts with us. Her article follows, and we recommend it to you.

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Working in academe requires many skills — some management, some personal, and some strongly flavoured with common sense. To assist the younger academic embarking on life in the teaching hospital, and attempting to juggle the requirements of clinical work, teaching, research, and (oh, yes) the family at home, I hope these words will provide some guidance. These are not commandments, but rather touchstones that have evolved from years of playing the role of “juggler” and sometimes (but not always) keeping all the balls in the air.

On at least 3 days out of every 7, you will find yourself dealing with the “imposter syndrome,” that sense of inadequacy and worry that anyone else thought you could teach that topic, answer that question, or solve that problem. You, of course, will never verbalize this concern because, in looking around you, you know that no one else you work with ever experiences such a feeling. WRONG! Everyone does — it goes with the territory — and it doesn’t diminish with experience. You just get asked to answer harder questions or take on bigger projects. So accept the feeling — and be grateful that others do believe that you have the skills and capabilities that they are asking you to use.

That sense of inadequacy can be kept at arm’s length if you surround yourself with good people. First and most important, choose a life partner who is supportive of you and of what you want to accomplish. Without the opportunity to unwind and discover yourself in the home environment, the work environment will always be uncomfortable. If you have major family responsibilities, recognize that you can’t do everything, and go out and find good home help. A piecemeal approach to patient care, research, or looking after your home will always leave you frustrated and dissatisified (and underachieving). And make sure you have good secretarial and laboratory assistance. You should find individuals who can demonstrate initiative and work unsupervised for good portions of every day. If you are successful and do surround yourself with excellent people, then get out of their way and allow them to do the tasks you have asked them to do. Don’t micromanage their jobs; you have


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enough to do in managing your own. So now we can
emancipate the first important skill for life in academic:
**Skill #1: Learn to delegate**

If you’re not currently a “list maker,” consider
becoming one. This helps you to understand what
you have to do — and when — and also gives you the
satisfaction of crossing tasks off the list. Sometimes,
when the load seems incredibly heavy, it helps to put
some minor tasks on the list so that you have the sat-
sisfaction of seeing items actually crossed off. Try not
to procrastinate when paper lands on your desk. Skim
everything over quickly the day you receive it and
determine what requires immediate attention and
what can go on your list for action in the near future.
If you can deal with items rapidly, then you will not
have telephone calls and text email messages to
answer, nor will you have the personal dissatisfaction
of knowing that you are “behind” (at least in your
own mind). If you can’t do a task today, try to set
yourself a deadline or a specific timeframe — and put
that on your list. And carry a few (usually smaller)
bits of work with you everywhere. That way you can
make effective use of “down time” such as waiting in
an airport lounge or filling the time when a patient
fails to show up in clinic. The 20 or 30 minutes is
often all it takes to read a report, review a paper, or
draft a memo — and it can be crossed off your list.
Time management is a real skill, but it pays just as
much dividends in terms of personal satisfaction and
reduced stress. So our next essential skill is:
**Skill #2: Get organized**

The success of your life in the academic world will,
in large part, be based on your personal relationships.
You will work with and for a variety of individuals,
all of whom have remarkable strengths but also their
fair share of weaknesses. Although it is not always
easy, attempt to maximize the strengths of your co-
workers and minimize the weaknesses. You will then
create a reputation as a good colleague or teacher,
and good people will seek to work with you.
Try to identify one or more individuals who can
function as mentors for you, providing wisdom, career
advice, scientific guidance and, when necessary,
backup. There is a body of knowledge in the
literature about the value of having a mentor. If you do
not currently have someone to whom you can turn,
you may want to consult both the literature and others
with whom you work to assist you! The mentor need
not be of the same gender, or even in the exact same
field. Your mentoring needs will evolve as your career
develops, so recognize that you may require more than
one mentor during your academic lifetime. If you
select wisely, the individuals you choose as mentors
and advisors will introduce you to the wider world of your
discipline. The opportunity to develop in your field
will be helped almost as much by who you know as by
what you know. Therefore, the importance of your per-
sonal relationships at work becomes the basis for the
next skill:
**Skill #3: Maximize the potential of everyone with
whom you work**

Your life will be filled with requests to serve on this
committee or that task force. You do have a responsi-
bility to your medical school, your hospital, your dis-
cipline and to society. and you will learn a lot about
“the system” and about yourself by carrying your fair
share of this responsibility. Our health care system
and our educational system require that all contribute
to the committee work that is essential to keeping the
system running. So accept your share of committee
work and view the experience as a positive opportu-
nity that allows you to learn and to meet new people.
But try to maintain a balance and don’t become over-
whelmed by the demands of committee work. You
were not hired or trained to sit on committees, but
rather to become an investigator and a teacher. Keep
that perspective clearly in your mind.

**Skill #4: Learn to say no**

It is very easy to be consumed by your work and to
abandon family and friends in your desire to
get more grant money, see more patients, write more
papers and assure that your career develops the way
you wish it to. Delaying the development of mean-
ingful relationships or casting aside long-standing
friendships for the express purpose of your own
career development is a way to assure unhappiness.
Look after yourself. Make sure you eat properly (you
have probably already learned that lesson during res-
didency), sleep a reasonable amount, and exercise reg-
ularly. That is the same advice you would give to a

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patient. Take it yourself! Remember that unhappiness and poor health will not help your career.

Don’t abandon your family. Your parents and siblings are very proud of you, but they also played a major role in getting you to where you are today. They need the satisfaction of seeing you regularly, in good health. Similarly, your significant other is essential to your own psychological health. Don’t exclude this individual from your life, either by withholding your personal presence in the home or by failing to share both the satisfactions and the stresses of your career. And cultivate your staff! A happy staff will do anything for you; an unhappy one will quietly sabotage your career. Try to be remembered as much for who you are as for what you do.

Skill #5: Ensure your own legacy

You will probably think of many more skills that would be of value to you in the academic world. But these 5 simple skills are a reasonable basis for evolving your own set of guidelines. If you can learn to delegate, get yourself organized, maximize the potential of everyone with whom you work, learn to say “no,” and consider the legacy that you will leave, you should go far in academia.

All the planning in the world, however, won’t prepare you for the opportunity or experience that suddenly appears and wasn’t part of your own personal plan. Serendipity has been an important part of some very famous research developments, including the discovery of penicillin, the use of β-blockers in the management of ischemic heart disease, etc. So, although you should remain focused on the goals that you have set for yourself, try not to be blinkered. Be able to look at many aspects of an opportunity, be it in research, teaching or your career. Try to see problems that arise in your day-to-day activities as challenges and not barriers. When you wish to change the system, consider using infiltration rather than confrontation. Getting involved and working from within can produce massive change without precipitating crisis. You may decide the research peer review process or the system for allocating teaching hours, but you will be far more effective if you become part of the peer review process or just a curriculum committee. When opportunity knocks, be there!

Reference


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