1 Becoming a Strategic Researcher: Increasing your Chances of Long-Term Success

INTRODUCTION

As its title would suggest, this book has been specifically written for the qualified healthcare professional (both junior and senior) who wishes to consolidate or build a successful career as a health researcher. However, as my research portfolio and responsibilities have expanded, so has my appreciation of those individuals (predominantly science and public health graduates) who have dedicated their careers to health research without undertaking specific clinical training. Not surprisingly, I have found that many of the career conundrums and issues that I have faced are the same ones that my fellow health researchers, irrespective of the presence or absence of a clinical background, have grappled with. This book’s content and purpose, therefore, are not far removed from those individuals pursuing a purely scientific research career within the broad domain of health research.

It is within this context that this book outlines a range of strategies that will increase the probability of building a successful career in health research. Significantly, this book contains two key messages listed below that, despite their simplicity, are too often ignored by the average health professional considering an academic or clinical career with a strong research focus. This is not so surprising given the general lack of research culture and recognition of research within many emerging healthcare disciplines. It is a brave individual who declares their intention to adopt a different path from the majority of their colleagues and focus on becoming an expert in clinical research rather than a singular clinician – even if (as will be explored in Chapter 2) there needs to be a synergistic relationship between the two to achieve more effective clinical practice and better health outcomes. Given the inherent prejudices and ill-informed advice that such a declaration often attracts, a potentially promising career can easily lose momentum without careful consideration of what is required to achieve that career goal and how it can be reached with the minimum of external resistance and personal pain and suffering. Alternatively, there are those within historically strong health professions who are
immune to the ‘layers’ of support and positive affirmation associated with their profession and somehow contrive to ‘miss the boat’ towards research success. It is for this reason that, regardless of your profession or area of expertise, you should carefully consider the following advice:

1. Plan your research career as early as possible – even if it involves initially focusing on developing ancillary skills and expertise (e.g. a nurse clinician with five years’ full-time experience who then decides to take an interest in research).

2. Recognise the strategic importance of every facet of your professional activity in moving you towards achieving your ultimate goal.

It is important to recognise, at this point, that in most competitive circumstances (i.e. when you are competing with your peers for a position or funding support), selection panels will closely examine your curriculum vitae for clear links in the chain that are indicative of a progressive professional development into someone ‘exceptional to the norm’. Not knowing, or indeed understanding, your personal history or circumstances, a selection panel will usually assume that you and your competitors have been given the same opportunities and attributes to succeed. What they will be searching for is that rare individual who demonstrates a single-minded purpose and determination to succeed: an individual who has not only worked on their strengths but conquered their weaknesses. If your curriculum vitae has ‘winner’ written all over it based on past accomplishments, it will foretell more success. Conversely, if it indicates past failures, you will have to work harder (if given the opportunity) to convince a panel verbally that there were either extenuating circumstances (e.g. you were raising a family or overcoming illness) or that you’ve changed your errant ways. Why, for example, should they select you to undertake a post-doctoral fellowship in a timely and successful manner and build towards a substantive research career when your PhD thesis was completed in a less than timely manner and/or had little or no impact – other than gathering dust on a library shelf?

Rather than wait until the completion of a higher research degree to reflect on your career direction, therefore, it is much better to plan at least two to three years ahead for the next crucial step and, in some cases, make long-term ‘investments’ that may not pay dividends in terms of your research career until five to ten years later. In this respect, there are a number of positive things and factors you can build into your personal plan to succeed as a researcher.

MENTORS AND ROLE MODELS

There are very few successful people who would not, at a moment’s notice, be able to nominate the people who inspired, supported and/or cajoled them
to excel. One of the most positive forces in my own career progression has been a select group of senior mentors who have fulfilled such a role to perfection at key points in time. Like all relationships, finding and maintaining a mentor to support you and your career is a two-way process that requires commitment from parties, involving a common purpose and direction in addition to mutual respect. As potent as such a relationship can be, it is important to note that ‘pseudo or false mentors’ (i.e. those who are prepared to use the relationship and your success to improve their own career!) are common and can prove to be a highly destructive force in your career.

It is vitally important, therefore, to recognise the common characteristics of a positive and true mentor who will support you for the right reasons:

- usually in a senior role similar to the one you wish to ultimately attain;
- preferably an international expert with good collaborative networks;
- achieved the type of things you want to achieve;
- comfortable in their own role, with nothing to prove in terms of individual success;
- readily acknowledge and demonstrate the role of teamwork;
- a good communicator;
- have or had their own mentors;
- not scared to support someone they consider to be more talented than themselves;
- prepared to accept that, one day, they might be asking you for a job!

Given the above list, in a positive mentoring relationship, your mentor will be prepared to:

- support you unfailingly in public;
- criticise and provide constructive advice in private;
- sacrifice their own needs for yours;
- recommend your services to peers;
- assist in any activities that further your career progression;
- persevere with you and affirm your career goals;
- tolerate irrational moments when all seems to be lost!

Of course, there is no ‘dating service’ for potential mentors and acolytes. However, as mentoring is considered to be a core component of being a successful academic or clinician, the best mentors are always searching for individuals who have good career potential and are prepared to spend the time making connections (even if they prove that there is no future in that particular relationship). Building a solid curriculum vitae in the early stages of your career and demonstrating the qualities of a ‘winner’ (as outlined) will undoubtedly increase your chances of being noticed and invited to discuss your career options with a promising mentor. In many instances, a mentor will also act as a PhD supervisor, but the two shouldn’t be confused, as they can be mutually exclusive. Relying on one key mentor to assist you in your career development
is fraught with danger given the inherent risk of illness, relocation or, indeed, a falling-out based on personal differences. In many cases, you’ll find that a mentoring relationship will naturally evolve without either party’s verbalising the underlying process that’s taking place. However, given the risk of relying upon a single mentor, it makes sense to seek out a wider circle of mentors who can provide additional support.

Over time, a mentoring relationship will naturally evolve and mature much like any other relationship, particularly if you are able to close and, potentially, bridge the gap in career progression and achievements. The true test of a ‘mentor–acolyte’ relationship is, therefore, time and your ability to maintain a sense of respect and even reverence for the person who has helped you develop into the person/researcher you have become. Certainly, I have struggled at times to maintain ‘equilibrium’ with my earliest mentors. As such, the natural tension between developing an individual research identity and confidence has often clashed with a natural deference to a mentor’s advice and opinions. However, like any good relationship, open and honest communication and empathy with each other’s views and perspectives will always prevail, particularly if you are able to develop your own mentoring skills.

If many of the concepts and principles described above are similar to those found in ‘self-help’ books on building a healthy marriage or family relationship, it should come as no surprise. A positive mentor is worth the time and investment to weather changes in the circumstances and status of both parties. A false mentor, of course, should be quickly ‘divorced’, particularly if they exhibit any kind of abusive behaviour (e.g. taking full credit for your research, demoting you on the author list of an important paper or developing the next iteration of your research without providing you with the opportunity to progress your career).

A key component of a mentoring relationship is, of course, personal compatibility, common interests and, in many cases, a true friendship. Not every successful individual is, therefore, a potential mentor. In this context, learning from individuals who may possess a personality that clashes with your own but deserve your respect due to their ability to excel is also vitally important. Such ‘role models’ are usually much easier to find than a mentor with whom you are able to establish a true connection. The importance of such role models should not be under-estimated. If there is someone you are particularly impressed with and would like to emulate, try and find out how and why they have achieved what you admire. This may be difficult without ‘cross-examining’ them in detail, but by closely scrutinising what and how they do, you should be able to pick up important clues to improve your own success. For example, in my early clinical career as a cardiac nurse on a busy Coronary Care Unit, I was immediately struck by the calm and reassuring nature of the nurse in charge of the Unit. This was never more evident than when the inevi-
table ‘cardiac arrest’ of a patient occurred. While the attending nurses, cardiologists and anaesthetists alike typically created a heady cocktail of stress and urgency that could easily suck the unwary (including yours truly) into a sense of panic and disordered thinking, this particular nurse (who always exuded a sense of calm and authority) would immediately take control and ensure the best of emergency care was delivered. Although I never had the chance to talk through how and why he was able to become the ‘calm eye of the storm’ in the Coronary Care Unit (he was a very taciturn and private person), I certainly aspired to exude the same sense of calm and mastery when confronted with emergency situations. It was only a few years later, after I had spent many hours learning my advanced life support skills and successfully coordinated the resuscitation of two patients who had simultaneously suffered a cardiac arrest (one patient undoubtedly scared the other to ‘death’ by suddenly collapsing and turning blue) with only one resuscitation cart and, therefore, one set of equipment, that I felt that I had mastered some of what this earlier ‘role model’ had shown me through actions much more powerful than the spoken word. I immediately remembered to calm and focus my thoughts and actions many years later (i.e. long after leaving a clinical role), when I was the first to arrive on the scene of a ‘head-on’ vehicle accident with multiple casualties and more recently when coping with two seriously ill passengers on a long-haul flight without immediate medical support.

Remaining calm and focussed in the often hectic process of beating a deadline for delivering a research application on time is an attribute/goal I’ve consistently aspired to as a result of my ‘emergency’ experiences and, of course, one of my earliest role models – the ‘icy calm’ charge nurse of the Coronary Care Unit. It is in this way that role models, even when they touch your life only briefly, can have a profound and lasting impact on you, your career and your overall view of the world. Role models obviously require less investment in time and energy, but may well yield similar positive results in building a successful research career.

**POSITIVE PEER RELATIONSHIPS**

No one will really understand what you are experiencing and striving to achieve more than your peers in the research world. The term ‘research world’ is probably most appropriate in this context given that you are most likely to derive the greatest benefits from establishing and maintaining contact with researchers on a national and international basis as opposed to local level, particularly if there is a scarcity of researchers from your own discipline. Despite some differences, the process of undertaking a higher research degree and striving to move on to a productive post-doctoral position that will lead to a permanent research position is the same the world over. Rather than
treating every individual in your immediate area of expertise as a rival or enemy to be despised and destroyed in case they outperform you and successfully compete for funding or a key position, it is more productive to form strategic partnerships that will assist you to achieve your short- and long-term goals. This may sound dramatic, but the research world is littered with individuals who strive to dominate rather than collaborate. Many overly competitive researchers spend precious time and energy working out ways to unravel a colleague’s career rather than spending it constructively on their own endeavours. To succeed, focus on improving yourself, not denigrating your peers! If you are on the end of someone’s vitriol or machinations, take it as a compliment and remember to stay focussed on what you can control and achieve. Forming relationships with international peers (usually at international conferences) is particularly useful and has the potential to facilitate the following:

- being introduced to their own mentor(s), who may well be international experts in your field of research and may facilitate an academic visit in the future or peer-review your next research article;
- undertaking an academic visit at another research institution;
- developing a collaborative research project;
- jointly publishing review papers;
- keeping up to date with the latest research developments or opportunities for research funding;
- sharing strategies and ideas to further develop your research skills and output;
- providing moral support at key moments (e.g. presenting at a large scientific meeting);
- arranging an overseas post-doctoral fellowship.

In the longer term, there is a strong possibility that at least one of your peers will become an international expert. Future collaborations with such a person, particularly with a track record of papers and projects over a long period of time, will provide you with greater access to research funds and/or the potential to generate a larger number of publications in high-impact journals.

**HOT RESEARCH TOPICS**

As will be discussed in greater detail in later chapters, without a long-term career plan, many promising researchers consign themselves to failure from the beginning by choosing, or allow themselves to adopt, a mundane or routine research programme that is never going to be published in high-impact journals (see Chapter 8) or attract invitations to speak at international conferences. Quite naturally, many novice researchers regard the opportunity to
undertake a PhD as the defining moment of their research career and that everything will take care of itself thereafter. However, long after the glow of self-satisfaction in achieving the hard-earned reward of being called ‘Doctor’ has dimmed, many researchers are left to ponder why their ‘passport’ to research success has been rejected at the next border. In the majority of cases, this will reflect the fact that a novice researcher has been ‘lost’ within a large research programme and their research is either ‘owned’ by their principal supervisor or is unlikely to make any immediate impact synonymous with the candidate themselves.

As indicated above, a long-term strategic plan that looks beyond a PhD and focuses on post-doctoral studies is the best antidote to an ‘impulsive’ decision to accept second-best offers to undertake a research programme that will ultimately support the career of an established researcher or larger research programme – in essence, avoiding a ‘PhD factory’ run by ‘false or pseudo mentors’ who are still striving to specifically further their own research career.

**ACTIVE PROFESSIONAL ENGAGEMENT**

Standing out from your peers naturally takes time and commitment. It not only involves working harder and smarter on your research, connecting and collaborating with your research peers (regardless of their health or scientific discipline), but also becoming professionally active in a range of ways that might include:

- becoming a formal and active member of a relevant professional organisation;
- volunteering for committee duties;
- organising local to international scientific and educational meetings;
- registering as a journal peer reviewer in your area of expertise;
- regularly attending scientific meetings and asking critical questions during symposia;
- assisting in the compilation of expert guidelines.

Despite the time and commitment required, all of the above represent good long-term investments to access specific research funds for pilot research projects, travel funds to attend larger scientific conferences, invitations to join editorial boards of national and international journals and, ultimately, to professional recognition as invited Fellowship to a prestigious professional organisation.

As always, it is important to avoid working for one specific organisation and, therefore, choosing a careful balance of discipline-specific organisations, larger non-discipline-specific organisations that provide access to a range of health professionals and prestigious international organisations that may take
longer to engage with. Clearly, working for professional organisations will facilitate your ability to meet and collaborate with your peers and meet potential mentors and role models.

RAPID CAREER PROGRESS

One of the major quandaries in building a research career is ‘part-time versus full-time PhD/higher degrees’. A straw poll of ultimately successful researchers, regardless of the discipline, will provide you with a strong hint – always choose the fast track to attaining your goals! Unfortunately, in many health disciplines, the former has proven to be more popular. There are many reasons why part-time PhDs have proven to be more popular:

- The underlying research culture of many clinically based disciplines favours individuals who appear to retain their ‘clinical credibility’ whilst undertaking research: they can’t be accused of turning their back on their profession.
- Psychologically, part-time is less of a ‘commitment’ to a research career – it leaves greater room to withdraw with dignity in case of failure.
- Full-time funding is often difficult to obtain.
- The demands of family and a social life appear to be best met by part-time status.

The last, in particular, is a major fallacy, given that a part-time PhD equates to up to eight years of juggling the two ‘masters’ of work and study compared with three years of concentrating on a single goal, often, with careful planning, providing a flexible workload that is more amenable to family life. It is important to stress, once again, that successful researchers often take the harder, less travelled road to success. This means completing a succinct and productive PhD and then maintaining a highly productive career path. If we individually address the four issues raised above, it becomes clear how completing a full-time research apprenticeship is nearly always preferable to becoming successful in the longer term:

1. *Create your own research culture!* Remember that selection panels/quality mentors are always looking for something different. If you are younger and have developed your research career more rapidly, you’ll be ahead of your competitors from the very beginning.
2. *He/She who dares wins!* If you are suffering from a crisis of confidence when entering a PhD, you clearly haven’t the personal attributes and mentoring support to complete the long and arduous journey.
3. *Quality research attracts funding!* If you have planned your research career properly, you will already be competitive for internal or external scholar-
ships (most of which have tax advantages and allow you to work on a casual clinical basis to provide a solid income) and with appropriate mentoring, good supervisors and cutting-edge research, should ensure you are in a position to undertake your PhD full-time.

4. **Short-term pain equals long-term gain!** As already noted above, faced with three compared with six to eight years of hard work and life disruption as part of a PhD candidature, most sane people would opt for the former. Apart from the fact that six to eight years will magnify the usual feelings of hopelessness and lack of progress associated with a PhD, it will place you a good three to four years behind your competitors who adopt a full-time approach.

As will be expanded upon later, even when undertaking a PhD full time, many candidates mistake volume for quality and, perhaps more importantly, the ultimate purpose of the PhD itself. In this context, it is vitally important to remember that a PhD thesis (particularly if it takes the form of a traditional volume of more than 200 pages) is not the defining product of your efforts: people don’t weigh a thesis to determine how good you are and everyone ends up with same honorific and three-letter initials. In actual fact, it is the personal and research qualities you have developed during the process that determine the overall quality of your PhD.

What does this mean in practical terms? First, if you can learn and acquire the qualities of an independent researcher within a couple of years and can produce a thesis that passes scrutiny, plan to submit as early as possible rather than writing pages that will lie dormant on your shelf for years to come! In this respect, it is preferable to produce a thesis via published research reports that both force you to be succinct and to the point and provide external validation via external review: it would be a brave examiner indeed who rejected concrete evidence that you’ve made the grade by publishing your research in a quality, peer-reviewed journal! Once you’ve established a pattern and reputation of rapid progress, it will become a self-fulfilling prophecy for you to be labelled as someone on the ‘fast track’ and given further opportunities to rapidly progress in your research career.

**SUMMARY**

There are many factors that can work either for or against you in trying to develop a successful research career. You need to be aware of the factors that are represented in Figure 1.1 and develop a framework of positive factors to support your career. In the same context, it is important not to become overwhelmed by unavoidable negative factors or become too concerned with your ‘competitors’ (other than benchmarking your progress and/or building
A SELF-FULFILLING PROPHECY

Key Points: Plan your research career as early as possible – even if it involves initially focussing on developing ancillary skills and expertise. Recognise the strategic importance of every facet of your professional activity in moving you towards achieving your ultimate vision for your career.

Figure 1.1. Positive and negative factors that impact on an emerging research career

constructive relationships – see Chapter 4). By creating a favourable environment for success by selecting the right people to support you (e.g. mentors and peers), the right research (e.g. internationally competitive), expanding your sphere of influence through high-profile professional activities and, finally, taking the fast track to productivity, you are more likely to succeed. Ultimately, success is almost always a self-fulfilled prophecy.