

The path to academic medicine: living your life

Karen Sliwa-Hahnle explains how she became a world expert in a rare form of cardiomyopathy while seeing the world and starting a family, and she offers advice to aspiring academics

tips on . . .

Starting a research post

Organise

- Get a copy of a reference manager like End Note as early as possible and start using it. It saves lots of time later
- Use it to file what will become a large collection of papers
- Keep records of all meetings and experiments in something easily readable and unlikely to be thrown away
- You will find much greater flexibility in managing your own time. It is important not to lapse into old student ways of long lie-ins and daytime television
- Aim to write up as you go along, and start thinking about this early
- Things can move at very different speeds in a university department compared with a hospital. You may be used to getting things done quickly, but your idea of "now" and their idea of "now" can differ by weeks. Budget for this
- Your lack of planning does not automatically become somebody else's emergency
- Back up everything, regularly

Finances

- Remember that although you are taking a 50% pay cut to do research, you still earn considerably more than most of your university colleagues
- Get an ISIC card and a Young Person's railcard and once more enjoy cut-price travel
- You may be exempt from council tax—check with your local authority

Educational

- Find out about any courses on PowerPoint, Excel, or academic writing. They will be useful and should be free
- Some supervisors will constantly check up on you, others will adopt a more hands off approach. You must be positive about the benefits that each approach brings. ■

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I have never let my career interfere with living my life, but I have none the less excelled in reaching academic milestones. Many professionals postpone pursuing their personal passions to achieve career aspirations. Those goals need not be mutually exclusive. Never think you can enjoy life in a few years or have a family later. Do those things when you are ready, or you might miss your opportunity.

See the world

Travelling is one of my greatest passions, and I have used my medical career as a vehicle rather than a barrier to seeing the world. I attended medical school in my native country of Germany but spent elective periods and house staff time in the Philippines, India, and Scotland. I completed my doctoral thesis on immune activation in leishmaniasis at Hadassah University in Israel in 1990 and worked for two years at the Tropical Research Institute in Berlin, Germany. I then moved with my husband and one year old daughter, Lina, to South Africa to work at Baragwanath Hospital, the largest hospital in the southern hemisphere.

Working in different places broadens your horizons and teaches you that there are many different approaches to medicine in various countries and cultures. Pick out the practices that you like most, and use them to enhance your own.

Stay grounded

Doctors are often asked to give advice on important life matters such as decisions about treatment of incurable diseases, prolongation of life, and abortion. I believe that good doctors have to lead a life with ups and downs to be compassionate. Academic life fills you with lots of theory, but you need practical experience to be prepared to handle all types of situations.

Family provides a healthy dose of reality. In 1995, I earned a diploma in tropical medicine and hygiene at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, and in the same year, I had my second daughter, Julia. I qualified as a specialist physician in 1997 and finished a fellowship in cardiology in 2001 at Baragwanath Hospital in Johannesburg, South Africa. I completed my PhD at the University of the Witwatersrand in 2002 and was promoted to associate professorship a year later.

My husband completed his training as a spinal orthopaedic surgeon at the same time. We agreed that we would never use our holidays to study for examinations. In a VW combi bus manufactured in 1972, we travelled to northern Namibia, Malawi, Zimbabwe, and Mozambique. As a family, we did hiking tours and learnt scuba diving.



Karen Sliwa-Hahnle and her husband at the top of Mount Kilimanjaro

Seek a balance

Do what you love to seek a balance between work and play. On any given day, my schedule is full, yet rewarding. My daily duties comprise assessing cardiac patients, working in the catheterisation laboratory, teaching undergraduates and postgraduates, and doing extensive research related to immune activation in heart failure. My other interests such as hiking, scuba diving, art, travelling, politics, or just chatting with friends refuel my energy for an often tough professional life. You come across better both personally and professionally if you look relaxed and fit rather than stressed and worn out.

Be innovative

As medical technology evolves, you have to keep ahead of the changes. Keep theoretical knowledge as a base, but be innovative and constantly develop new skills. It is often your unique skills that provide opportunities for career advancement. The best advice I ever received was from Professor Sidney Klaus from Hadassah University in Israel. He taught me to be a star in a small field as you can never be an expert in everything.

My interest and training in immunology and tropical disease directed my research in cardiology to the area of immune activation in heart failure. I am now considered one of the world experts in a condition called peripartum cardiomyopathy, a devastating heart muscle disease which occurs in women after pregnancy.

Know your value and learn to negotiate

Despite higher academic achievement, women worldwide do not always rise to the leadership positions held by men. Women are often brought up thinking that they have to be "good girls," meaning being polite, quiet, and popular with superiors and peers. While some of these attributes are important, they are the opposite to the attributes needed to become an achiever.

Know your valuable skills and learn to negotiate your rights from the beginning of your career. No one will do it for you. If it does not come naturally, take a course in public speaking or debating. Even as a student, don't be shy about discussing authorship on manuscripts early in the process. If you are not the first, second, or last author, put your main energy towards the next project. Discuss the emergency call schedule for holidays early

in the year. Be prepared to make an offer—for example, “I will be on-call on New Year’s Eve, but I would like to have leave over Christmas.”

Reaching the top does require a degree of egotism and some “elbow spreading.” Women often stall at middle management or junior faculty levels because they are the popular workhorses who do all the things that no one else wants to do. They get a polite thank you from their seniors while others, often men, get promoted to higher positions. Set your sights on where you want to go, be persistent, and do not waste too much time with unpleasant jobs that are not leading anywhere.

Don’t expect to be loved by everyone

You should not expect to be loved by all of your colleagues. It is inevitable that some people will be jealous of your successes. You should strive for respectful and fair working relationships with your colleagues. Try to be good in a particular field, but acknowledge the excellence of your colleagues in other areas and collaborate with them.

Make academic medicine better for the next generation

When you attain leadership positions, try to break the dysfunctional habits of having ward rounds and meetings that are incompatible with an otherwise rich personal life. Many academic events are needlessly scheduled after hours or on Saturday mornings. Do not promote the belief that doctors must work long hours every day to prove that they are indispensable. Encourage efficiency and balance, and you will have better doctors to care for you. ■

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Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice



Who’s it for?

Anyone who teaches in higher education—not just university lecturers, but anyone with teaching responsibilities, such as specialist registrars or research fellows.

When did you do it?

During my final two years as a specialist registrar in public health medicine (2003-4), while I was based in an academic unit.

Why did you do it?

I found myself teaching with little to go on except my own experiences as a student; I wanted to teach more effectively. Also, the qualification confers registered practitioner status with the Higher Education Academy—potentially useful for future job hunting.

How much effort did it entail?

Attending the taught sessions is not onerous, but to get the most out of the experience you’ll need to read some educational theory and think hard about why you do what you do.

Is there an exam? (and if so, what’s the fee?)

No. You submit a reflective portfolio of work to demonstrate your competence.

Did you go on a course? (and if so, what’s the fee?)

Yes. I went on a programme of workshops covering everything from designing courses to assessing

students and supervising postgraduates—about two days’ worth each term for five terms. There was no charge for members of university staff.

Top tip

Get someone you trust to observe one of your lectures or tutorials—they’ll notice things you’d otherwise never notice.

Contact for further information

I did the course at the University of Glasgow (www.gla.ac.uk/services/tls/nlp/index.html). Your local university should have something similar, or check the Higher Education Academy’s list of accredited courses (www.heacademy.ac.uk).

Was it worth it?

Absolutely. I learnt the basics—how to facilitate a small group and how to give a lecture—but also much more. Writing the portfolio forces you to confront some hard questions: what exactly is your subject for, why are you doing it, and what can your students learn by studying it? It was also intriguing to compare notes across disciplines: finding out how people teach music or maths can inspire you to abandon boring lectures and innovate. ■

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