

## OCCASIONAL NOTE

## A life in academe

Jean Gray, MD

Dr. Gray is with the Queen Elizabeth II Health Sciences Centre and Dalhousie University in Halifax, NS, and is the former president of the Canadian Society for Clinical Investigation.

*Clin Invest Med* 1999;22(6):275-7.

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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 CSCI, 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.*

**A.B.R. Thomson, MD**  
President, Canadian Society  
for Clinical Investigation

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 wonder that anyone ever 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 dissatisfied (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

enough to do in managing your own. So now we can enunciate the first important skill for life in academe:

***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 satisfaction 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 irate 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. That 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 immense 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, broad shoulders. 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.<sup>1</sup> 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 chose as mentors and advisers 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 personal 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 responsibility to your medical school, your hospital, your discipline 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 opportunity that allows you to learn and to meet new people. But try to maintain a balance and don't become overwhelmed 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 become 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 meaningful 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 residency), sleep a reasonable amount, and exercise regularly. That is the same advice you would give to a

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 academe.

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  $\beta$ -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 decry 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 join a curriculum committee. When opportunity knocks, be there!

**Reference**

1. Gray J. Mentoring the young clinician-scientist. *Clin Invest Med* 1998;21:279-82.

**Reprint requests to:** Dr. Jean Gray, Queen Elizabeth II Health Sciences Centre, Department of Medicine, Room 436, Bethune Bldg., 1278 Tower Rd., Halifax NS B3H 2Y9.