



JEANNETTE PARKES

SOUTH AFRICA

Jeannette Parkes is the Head of Radiation Oncology and Radiation Medicine at Groote Schuur Hospital at the University of Cape Town in South Africa.

Her clinical portfolio includes management of CNS tumours, bone and soft tissue tumours and paediatric radiotherapy. She is President of the College of Radiation Oncology of South Africa and clinical director of the Access to Care (Cape Town) programme.

Internationally, she is the low- and middle-income country (LMIC) representative on the Executive Committee of the Paediatric Radiation Oncology Society (PROS) and has been a team leader of SIOP Global Health Network's PROS LMIC Working Group since 2016. She is the radiotherapy representative on SIOP Africa's executive committee, as well as SNOSSA (Society of Neuro-Oncology in Sub-Saharan Africa) executive committee.

She has contributed to the WHO Working Groups for the technical package associated with the Global Initiative for Childhood Cancer (GICC) and has contributed to several international adapted treatment guidelines for treatment of paediatric cancer in low and middle income countries.

She is editor of the soon to be released IAEA guideline for paediatric radiation oncology, and has acted as PROS/ARIA coordinator and now chairperson of the ARIA AMG (adapted management guideline) steering committee.

***"It always seems
impossible
until it's done."***

Nelson Mandela

On Relationships that Influenced My Career

My dad is a medical specialist. His work, work ethic, wisdom and care for his patients and staff was an example to me as a teenager. I wanted to be part of the care community like he was, and this made me decide to apply to study Medicine.

From the time I joined the Radiation Oncology programme, I was drawn to paediatrics. Dr. Jenny Wilson was my immediate supervisor. Jenny had every patient's notes in her head, could plan, scan and treat patients herself. Her technical knowledge and knowledge of brain tumours was unrivalled. I wanted to be just like her. At that time, we were able to treat our paediatric patients with protons, and Jenny was my mentor and my teacher. Jenny died unexpectedly at the age of 50, and I vowed to continue her legacy.

In later years, my greatest strengths have lain in collaborations with colleagues. In the advocacy space for children with cancer, I have been profoundly influenced by Alan Davidson and Simon Bailey who continue to support and collaborate on projects to improve cancer care for children in LMIC. But the idea of including advocacy and LMIC as a separate stream in PROS, came from Natia Esiashvili. Natia has guided PROS LMIC and then PROS with her care and compassion and has influenced how I think about advocacy and possibilities to improve radiotherapy care for children globally.

All of these people have somehow influenced my thinking, my career choices and development and my goals, and I thank them.

On Challenges and Overcoming Them

At the time I started doing paediatric radiotherapy, I really struggled with the emotional side of the job. Counseling distraught parents, children who relapsed and children who had to live with the late effects of their disease and treatment was difficult. I think coping comes with experience and the knowledge that we can all only do our best. But it is made easier by always keeping up to date with the latest information, and making sure that what I suggested was the best possible treatment in our resource constrained environment. I surrounded myself with colleagues who knew more than I did that so I could learn from them. The PROS Society is unbelievably generous and my colleagues there are always available to help.

The other challenge that I identified early on is the inability of many countries in Africa to provide the services needed to treat children with cancer. The issues relate to teaching and training, equipment and infrastructure provision and drug availability to name a few. I have made it my business to actively campaign for improved radiotherapy services throughout Africa and other LMIC and for paediatric radiotherapy services in particular.

I think that the multi-disciplinary collaboration between international global organisations and professional groups within paediatric oncology is quite astounding. I am constantly reminded of what a privilege it is to work with such people. The group effort towards helping children with cancer in LMIC can never succeed without a multitude of individuals and organisations who all work to this end. But on a personal level, it is the individual international relationships that I value and that have made me stronger.

On Balancing Career and Other Life Responsibilities

I have been extra-ordinarily lucky in that my family has supported my career choices and my work whole-heartedly. My parents have looked after our children when they were little, done homework and driven them around. My husband has taken on more than his fair share of the admin around the house, and although I may not have been as omnipresent as some other mothers, I have always tried to be there for important occasions, and to be present mindfully so that I can enjoy the occasion.

I also have a wonderful group of doctors whom I work with at my hospital. They are extremely supportive, often taking on additional responsibility in times of need, helping us all to balance family responsibility when the need arises.

More recently, I have learned to better make some time for myself and to recognize the need for time away from work and projects to facilitate health and ongoing inspiration. This facilitates better projects and a better me in all avenues of my life. This was brought to stark relief for me when I was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2018, and suddenly became a patient, undergoing surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy—all the things I usually counseled other people about. It was difficult, but a wake-up call that I have to be kinder to myself, sometimes rely on others, and find that balance.

My Words of Wisdom for the Next Generation of Female Leaders

If I could give advice to myself at age 25, I would say "Choose a career path in something that excites and motivates you. Don't waste time doing work that doesn't."

To the younger generation of paediatric oncologists, I would suggest to choose their collaborators carefully. Always surround yourself with colleagues whose opinion you respect, and who have the same values as you do. Take your job seriously, and don't underestimate the toll that overwork places on your health and your family. You must work hard to achieve that work-life balance. Have fun! Make sure that your work offers the opportunity to mix with people you like, and do projects that are worthwhile and fulfilling.