



PAM KEARNS

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Dr. Pam Kearns is Emeritus Professor of Clinical Paediatric Oncology at the University of Birmingham, where she was Director of the Cancer Research UK Clinical Trials Unit from 2011-2023 and Director of the Institute of Cancer and Genomic Sciences from 2021-2024. Her research is focused on drug development and innovation in the design and delivery of national and international clinical trials for childhood cancers.

She is President of the European Consortium 'Innovative Therapeutics in Childhood Cancer' (ITCC) and a Founding Board member of multistakeholder platform 'ACCELERATE', promoting drug development for cancer in children and young people. She was President of SIOPE from 2019-2021 and served in the SIOPE Board until December 2024. In the UK, she chairs the Initiative for Multi-stakeholder Partnership to Accelerate Children's Cancer Trials, a national initiative seeking to improve UK trial delivery for young patients with cancer. She chairs the Research Assessment Panel for Great Ormond Street Hospital Charity and is Deputy Chair of the Board of Trustees for Cancer Research UK. She chairs the Board of Trustees for A Child of

The culture of any organisation is shaped by the worst behavior the leader is willing to tolerate.

oncology pharmacy services, ensuring that children receive the highest standard of care through evidence-based, innovative practices. Her vision extends to establishing dedicated paediatric oncology pharmacy departments and integrating pharmacists into multidisciplinary teams to optimise treatment regimens. Mine, a charity dedicated to supporting bereaved parents and is a Scientific Advisor to Children with Cancer UK and a Trusted Advisor to the Little Princess Trust.

On Relationships that Influenced My Career

The biggest step in my career development was the decision to become a paediatric oncologist and this was entirely influenced by the children and their families. Having drifted around various specialties in my junior training not knowing which career path to follow, I secured a paediatric training rotation in Leeds which serendipitously started in paediatric oncology; it was a 'light bulb' moment! I was touched by how the children and their families dealt with the challenges they were facing. I was fascinated by the science and the clinical research that under-pinned evidence-based treatments and I was inspired by the exceptional dedication of the oncology team. Although I had to put my ambitions on hold while I completed my general paediatric training, I never let go of my determination to become a paediatric oncologist.

The next big influence came with my move to Newcastle to take up a post as a paediatric oncology trainee. This is where I met the most influential person in my career: Sir Professor Alan Craft. Over the course of my career, Alan has been my boss, my mentor and now a valued friend. I was influenced by his no-nonsense approach and his ability to achieve the balance between honesty and compassion. By this I mean he showed me the importance of being transparent with patients and their families about brutal realities of a cancer diagnosis and the impact of treatment and in some cases, treatment failure but balancing this with empathy and understanding for the individuality of each patient, which shapes how the messages should be delivered. He taught me not just to hear but to listen.

Alan also introduced me to my 'paediatric oncology survival kit', i.e., how to unwind and cope with the stresses of the job. He told me to take up running; I did and it worked!

On Challenges and Overcoming Them

Challenges are part of any career progression but those that I thought were unacceptable barriers occurred earlier in my career and were related to the culture of prejudice against

the abilities of women in medicine and science. This ranged from mild but inappropriate comments through to unmitigated chauvinism and sexual harassment, resulting in me side-stepping career choices.

There is a tendency to train women to adapt to be able to achieve and succeed when working in culture of prejudice against the abilities of women. What I learnt is that women do not need to adapt; it is the culture that needs to be changed. It took me time to develop the confidence to challenge prejudiced behavior and to call it out when I see it happening to others. I would like to believe that this type of behavior is less now than when I was training, but I observe that it still occurs, and prejudicial conduct extends beyond gender and it is therefore critically important that we do not tolerate it and everyone accepts the challenge to eradicate it.

Another challenge that I faced as I progressed into more leadership roles, was the 'difficult colleague'. It is easy to be frustrated and demoralized by interactions with an apparently difficult colleague. What I have learnt is that by reflecting on why people are behaving in a certain way towards you, can help in understanding their perspective. For example, if you can imagine yourself in their shoes, with their challenges and circumstances, you can try to consider how and why this is influencing their behavior towards you. Understanding the other person's perspectives can help in understanding how to better manage situations. This can defuse difficult relationships as well as get the best out those with whom you are interacting.

On Balancing Career and Other Life Responsibilities

I am not sure I ever fully worked this one out! From the moment I embarked on my paediatric oncology career, I have loved my work and for that reason, it was easy to blur the boundaries between work and home life and in early years, I probably didn't get the balance right, hopelessly neglecting life outside work. However, mid-career, motivated by some personal life events that reminded me of the importance of family and friends, I proactively shifted the balance to make sure I always ring fence time that is not for work and in that time do things just for me and my husband. An important part of this is planning and taking holidays!!

I also found 'non-work-related projects' helped me, for

example training for a marathon or latterly long-distance cycling challenges. They are activities that are both time consuming and focus the mind away from work. I found this helped keep those all-consuming work challenges in perspective.

My Words of Wisdom for the Next Generation of Female Leaders

The advice I would give my 25-year-old self is the same advice I give the next generation, simply believe in yourself. Once you have decided on your ambition, plot your route and go for it! Our greatest enemy is self-doubt and we can endorse our own insecurities by only hearing negatives. Instead, remember your strengths and take advice from those you trust to help you grow and overcome your personal challenges.

The other advice I would give the next generation is to only embark on a career you really love. You spend a lot of your life at work, and you need to really want to do it. You need to be able to revel in the joy of the good days which will help you cope with the inevitable bad days.

My final advice is to make sure you have fun along the way! A career in paediatric oncology comes with a lot of national and international networking. You have the opportunity to meet a lot of fabulous and diverse people from the around the world. Spend time enjoying their company and learning from them.