The Best Mentor is More Than a Great Researcher

by Jesica Levingston Macleod

You’ve probably noticed her coordinating microbiology courses, or participating in seminars and career development workshops. She’s invariably helpful, and it won't surprise you that she won the 2013 Best Faculty Mentor to Postdoctoral Fellows award. She always dons gorgeous jewelry that elegantly matches her outfit, and she is an associate professor in the microbiology department. She graduated from the University of Salamanca in Biological Sciences and obtained her PhD here at ISMMS. She has published in top journals, earned prestigious grants and established successful collaborations in her pursuit to study the mechanisms of host immune system evasion by dengue, HIV and influenza viruses.

Have you figured out who we’re talking about? It’s Dr. Ana Fernandez-Sesma, and recently, we had the privilege of speaking with her and getting her take on science, success, life, and how to balance it all.

Postdoc Periodical: Why did you decide to be a scientist?
Dr. Ana Fernandez-Sesma: I always wanted to work in something related to medicine or science. I debated between medical school and biology, and in the end, I decided to go into biology during my university studies back in Salamanca (Spain). I do not regret it!

PP: Tell us about the pathway that you took towards becoming an assistant professor.
AF-S: I was very lucky, since I was given great opportunities during my early career, and I was able to see them and go with them. My career path was very serendipitous, though. After I finished my University studies, I came to the USA with my husband, who got a position as a post-doc in Mount Sinai. I wanted to pursue a Masters or PhD in biomedical sciences and I was very fortunate to land in the Microbiology department at Mt Sinai. I worked a couple of years as a research coordinator and got accepted into the PhD program. I was able to also continue in the Micro department to do my post-doc. At the end of my post-doc I applied for a pilot project as part of a big multi-investigator grant on a different subject from my PI’s main interest. I was able to generate enough data to apply for an R01 NIH grant. My R01 was funded and after interviewing outside of Mt. Sinai for a faculty position and getting a couple of job offers, I was offered a position, also in Mount Sinai, and I decided to stay.

PP: What characteristics make a good mentor?
AF-S: A good mentor should set a good example for his/her trainees and teach them honesty and respect for their colleagues.

PP: Can you give some advice for those women in science who are hesitant about the future?
AF-S: Your career may happen at a slower pace than for men, and you may have to keep proving that you deserve what you accomplished. Try not to let those things bother you too much, and do not let anyone take you for granted. The rewards in a scientific career are great, since we put so much of ourselves in what we do. You need to believe in yourself and believe in what you do. Also, surround yourself with a good network of people (including women, of course). I find that women need that kind of moral support and listening buddies to keep going.

PP: As a mother and a full time researcher, how do you handle the life/work balance?
AF-S: It is hard, you have to have your priorities straight and keep looking at your real goal. I do believe that your goal should be to be happy and proud of your work (both at home and at work). Do not set up unrealistic goals for yourself, but DO set up goals! Take every success as a privilege and … always celebrate with your team the accomplishments of the lab (the same way goes for your home/kids…). Just enjoy your life and try to set a good example for your kids (and for your students/postdocs). Don’t let your career goals overwhelm you and interfere with your life too much.

Personalized Career Counseling for Postdocs

By Claudia Tapia-Alveal

Are you looking for a new job? Planning to change careers? Frustrated with the job market? Or do you just want help sharpening your CV? If you answered yes to any of these questions, then this program is for you. The Office of Postdoctoral Affairs and the Postdoctoral Executive Committee launched a career counseling program open to all postdocs. Experienced life science career coach, Dr. Eric Vieira, who helped plan the program in April, will assist the Mt. Sinai community with the crucial steps towards continuing your career, including networking, identifying relevant skills, interests, and goals, define salary expectations, and help revamp your CV. This pilot program and its longevity depends upon your interest. Postdocs wishing to take advantage of this opportunity must first complete the following steps:
1) Fill out the online Career Interest Form (found at: http://goo.gl/QvE4Xo)
2) Create a Science Careers account at http://myidp.sciencecareers.org. This includes making your individual development plan (IDP) and completing the “Assessment” Modules.
3) Have an up-to-date CV/Resume in MS Word format.
4) Examine your expenses and figure out what kind of salary you will need to earn. An excel worksheet to help with this step, as well as more information, can be requested from Theresa Scarabino (Theresa.scarabino@msm.edu).
Once you complete these steps, contact Dr. Eric Vieira at emvieira00@gmail.com. You will be asked to forward your CV and myIDP results, and he will proceed to schedule an appointment according to availability.

The Mount Sinai Postdoc Periodical, May 2014
Alumni Q&A with Dr. Martina Schwarzkopf

This month, we’re introducing a new feature in which we speak with Mt. Sinai alumni who have made the successful transition from a postdoctoral fellowship to a job in another area. We will learn about their new positions, how they dealt with the job market, and ask for advice on how to navigate the entire process.

Our first interviewee is Dr. Martina Schwarzkopf, former postdoctoral fellow in the Departments of Cardiology and Developmental Biology.

1. From the moment that you decided to leave the bench, how long did it take you to find your first job?

It took me 1.5 years in order to get several aspects ready for it to happen. First, I focused on finishing and publishing my work before I left. Second, I realized that in order to have a better chance I had to obtain a Green Card, therefore I applied as soon as I decided to leave the bench. One important point about this aspect, since I applied independently, is that your publications are important to facilitate the process.

2. What was that first job? Did you require new skills in order to get it?

For my first job, a friend that was working as a freelance science analyst in a market research company referred me for a freelance position at the same place. There, I learned by doing. Later on, my first full-time job was in healthcare communications and also in that case networking and referrals played an important role.

3. What do you think was key in order to get your full-time position?

I think that the experience as a freelancer was important; it showed I could work with clients and meet their deadlines. Also, basic knowledge in biotech, pharma, drug development and clinical trials was a plus.

4. Is there anything you know now that you wish you knew back then?

You should know that once you leave academia publications are not as important anymore, but it is always good to have them, especially if you have to apply for the green card.

5. What is your current job, and can you describe your duties?

I am an Assistant Vice President at a Healthcare Communications firm that focuses on early, emerging biotech companies; mid-stage biotechs and others. I work as an account manager with wide range of assignments, projects and clients. For example on a regular week I would participate on: strategic communication counsel; media relations; investor relations; crisis communication; writing technical bylined articles; review articles and developing strong client relationships.

6. Finally, what would you emphasize and recommend to a postdoctoral fellow that wants to leave academia?

Get experience outside academia e.g. as a freelancer to demonstrate that you can ‘think outside the box,’ meet deadlines and work under pressure.

We thank Dr. Schwarzkopf for taking the time to share her knowledge and experiences, as we continue bringing you more stories from Mt. Sinai postdoc alumni.

Interview by Claudia Tapia-Alveal

The latest ISMMS POSTDOCTORAL RECOGNITION AWARD goes to...

Dr. Teresa Tavassoli, Seaver Postdoctoral Fellow and Coordinator of the Postdoc Writing Group. For receiving a Postdoctoral Fellowship from the Autism Science Foundation, Dr. Tavassoli has been honored with the Postdoctoral Recognition Award by the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai. This award recognizes postdoctoral fellows who have competed for and won major national fellowships in the past year for their postdoctoral training at Mount Sinai. Join us in congratulating Dr. Tavassoli!

Announcements and Upcoming Events

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Mark your calendars:

- The Postdoc Writing Group meets every 1st and 3rd Friday of the month from 12-1pm. Come and improve your writing, editing and reviewing skills! When and where: Fridays at noon in Hess Center room 10-122 (10th floor). Their next meetings are June 6th and June 20th. If you have writing to work on, let us know and bring a few copies of it (1-2 page piece, ideally abstract or introduction and no results or methods sections). The group will even read CVs and cover letters. If not, just bring yourself, your helpful comments and a pen! Follow the ISMMS PostdocWriting group on twitter @PostdocWriting. To join the mailing list visit: http://mailman.mssm.edu/mailman/listinfo/postdoc-writing

- The writing seminar series happens every 2nd Monday of the month from 4-5pm. Come and improve your writing skills! When and where: Monday June 9th at 4 pm in the Annenberg building room 25-51 (25th floor). The next speaker is Dr. Eva Chmielnicki, editor at Nature Medicine. She will talk about how to publish your paper in a top tier journal. Food will be served.

Please RSVP to jessica.levingstonmacleod@mssm.edu.

- The Hematology and Oncology and TCI Postdoctoral Fellows Cancer Research meetings are the last Monday of every month. They meet in Annenberg 24-206A – contact nina.linde@mssm.edu for more information.