Choosing an easier path or following your passion

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In 1992, I returned to Australia after two and a half years as a Royal Society Endeavour postdoctoral fellow with Nicholas Hastie at the Medical Research Council (MRC) Human Genetics Unit in Scotland. I had the opportunity to work with Veronica van Heyningen, Wendy Bickmore and Cathy Pritchard-Jones in the early studies of the *WT1* gene. We identified mutations in Denys Drash syndrome and sporadic Wilm's tumour and investigated WT1's mode of action in normal development. It was an exciting time; PCR was new, tumour suppressors were the latest big thing and people were just getting to grips with positional cloning, and yeast and bacterial artificial chromosomes. Fabulous scientists wandered through the MRC every week, and Edinburgh was hours away from any other European research institute. However, having grown up in Brisbane, Australia, returning home with a postdoctoral fellowship in the laboratory of Brandon Wainwright at the, then, Centre for Molecular Biology and Biotechnology, was also about friends and sunshine.

But coming home was not quite what I had imagined. There was no Internet at that time — I remember writing a manuscript longhand during the journey home and mailing it to Edinburgh for input. Figures were put together with glue and Letraset. Journals came by ship and we queued at the university library to read the latest edition of *Nature*. I felt scientifically isolated and was not sure how to stay abreast of what was happening in the rest of the world. Then, within two months of getting home, I became pregnant. Suddenly, I was not so sure what lay ahead of me. With no family in Brisbane to help raise a child, I did not know how I could juggle work and motherhood.

As a graduate in Physiology at the University of Queensland, I enquired about taking a junior lecturer position as I thought that a teaching role would be more secure than a competitive research pathway. I do not remember when it dawned on me that, far from reducing my life's complications, this would add teaching to the juggling act of raising my child and conducting research. It has always been the joy of completing a

scientific story and seeing it published that has kept me doing research and teaching would leave me less time to do it. But, if I was any good at research, I should be able to continue to get funding even if I was a mother. This realisation was the turning point — I turned down the lecturer post and returned to the bench.

By the time my daughter Celeste was born in 1993, my lab had one student, Greg Holmes. We had lab meeting in the hospital the day after she was born. No one at my institute had come back to work with a newborn. I asked for a desk outside the laboratory area so I could bring her to work and I went back to the lab from when she was seven days old. At three months, she went to day care three days a week and I would ride a bicycle from the lab to the childcare centre to breastfeed her. From six months, she was in fulltime day care and we managed to find a routine. By 1994, I was awarded a Viertel Senior Research Fellowship; Celeste came to my interview. She came to seminars, grant review panels and meetings with patent attorneys. We always found a way to manage. My second child, Mahlon Nathaniel, was born four years later. Childcare fees consumed much of my salary, but there was no thought of me leaving work. By that time I had a lab of six or seven people, some of whom had their own children. Having a group-leader who was juggling this challenge made it easier for those who followed. There have been more than forty babies born to people in my lab since then, with the majority of women returning to work at some point.

My daughter is now 25 and my son just turned 21. Over the years, there were many times when I felt guilty about 'not being there' for my children. I did not pick them up at the end of the school day or go to the mothers' morning teas. When they were no longer little, I travelled with work far more than my husband. But I was there for all their milestones and for both of my children there was no doubt who was mum. They had joyous childhoods and remain the most wonderful part of my life. They also grew up to be self-sufficient, resilient and comfortable with my role. I am now nearing thirty years of post-PhD research. Throughout this time I have had continuous funding for my salary and all of my staff and students. Together, we have generated almost 200 publications. Together, we have moved from understanding the genes involved in forming a normal kidney during embryogenesis to being able to recreate kidney tissue from pluripotent stem cells. Together, we now have the chance to rebuild a kidney. Had I chosen an alternative path, I would not have been able to accomplish all I have in research and I would have been miserable. My kids were happy with their lives because I was happy with my own. ❐

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Competing interests

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