The FMHS Postdoctoral Society presents....

How Did They Do That?

This booklet contains useful information presented in a panel event held on **Tuesday the 18th July 2017.**

We all know that producing publications is the aim of the game but it isn't the whole game. To have a well-rounded CV and tick some of the extra boxes in your PBRF you also need to be involved in other research-related, outreach and service activities. We aimed to ask a panel of successful early career researchers how they found opportunities to be involved in such activities. The questions asked by the host and audience are below with a summary of the panel's suggestions/comments. We hope that especially new but also established postdocs will find the information herein useful. Look out for our regular career development events and check out our website for summaries of past events.

Our panel members were Dr Jo James, Dr Francis Hunter, Dr Kim Mellor and Dr Raj Shekhawat; the event was hosted by Dr Kate Lee.

- **How did you get on that international research committee?**

A common theme was that this opportunity came about via recommendation of a mentor/supervisor. Connections made at international conferences was also an important factor. Conferences are a great place to meet peers who may be in high places currently or in the future. Being from NZ has advantages if a committee is looking diversify its committee, which is likely to be heavily representative of the top institutions (e.g. in the USA). Postdocs here however perform a different role, leadership at earlier stage that we can speak to better than others internationally, although it can be difficult to compete with international scholars in terms of metrics and traditions. When considering your CV, those in the USA or Europe may not understand what our awards and fellowships mean. This is where having someone senior to vouch for you and contextualise your achievements can help. You could also look to find ways to engage with that society/committee e.g.

you could respond to a symposium proposal call, get your mentor and possibly someone from the committee to be involved in your submission if possible. Have evidence in your CV of service.

- **What is the time commitment involved?**

This can vary depending upon your efforts and interests. Perhaps only a monthly conference call (potential to multitask during a conference call). Chairing subcommittees might add a monthly conference call. If involved in organisation of a flagship conference, the weeks leading up are busy but not huge. This involvement gives you face-time with senior people, so the benefits outweigh the downside of time commitment.

- **How did you get on that grant review board?**

Via a mentor, or senior colleague. Helps if you make it known you are open to such opportunities. Often grant awardees may get asked to review grants in the future. Building a good relationship with the funder is important. Again, meeting people at conferences has led to such opportunities.

- **How did you get on that journal editorial board?**

Reviewing papers for that journal. Whenever you review a paper the journal editor scores your review, those with good scores might be invited to join the editorial board. A good review needs to have constructive comments and well-founded criticism. The time commitment involved may be a couple of manuscripts a month to edit. Also, making yourself available to do a last-minute review once or twice will put you in the good books of the editor. To get the opportunity to review manuscripts, talk to your boss. They will likely get many invites to review and will have to turn some away and might be able to suggest you as an alternative reviewer. Watch out for spam emails and always weigh up time vs benefit as more such opportunities start coming through.

- **How did you prepare to be on TV/Radio?**

The Media SAVY workshop from the science media centre comes highly recommend. On the last day you pitch your research and one panel member had media interaction following on from attendance at this workshop. If you get a grant, often the research office or the funder will put out a press release. These can have limited success in terms of being taken up by the press. You could take the press release to your contacts (made at the media SAVY event) and see if they want to take this story on. If you know you've won a grant but it is under embargo, you can contact media before it is released so they can publish an interview/article as soon as the press release comes out. Winning HealthX or a similar competition may also get you noticed by the media or at least university radio.

You can register with science media centre that you can offer expert opinion on certain things. Get to know which media people (there are only a few of them in NZ) you want to work with and who portrays you as you like. Check their balance between science and sensation. Don't forget you can also talk to those within the faculty who are experienced in science communication.

- **Do you think a presence on Social media is important?**

Our panel all felt it was important despite some of them not currently using social media for professional purposes. Tweeting at a conference can help you connect with others in your field and we were told it got one of our colleagues invited to sit on a social media committee of an international society.

- **How did you set up or get involved in international collaborations?**

Maintain any relationships with a mentor or PhD supervisor that is well connected, important for connecting with leaders in the field. If you get an opportunity to go and do research or learn a new technique in a prestigious lab, take it. Perhaps even make the opportunity. If you make a link via someone else, consolidated it personally. Collaboration is a key strategy to maintain research portfolio when only have partial FTE in research. One panel member mentioned obtaining 5 different travel grants to visit people he knew from conferences to explore projects, you can achieve a lot in 1 week when away from the lab. Condensed time to write grants/ reviews etc in collaboration with international "friends". Collaborations are indispensable to having impact in your research portfolio. Supplying research materials in exchange for collaborative outputs is one way in which a collaboration may be set up. Consultancy relationships can be useful too. Rapport and mutual trust are crucial. May take longer to publish but more beneficial. Rather than cold calling, go and visit them. Consultancy was achieved via participating in events and competitions.
One panel member recommended reading 'How to win friends and influence people' as it has good advice on how to engage, make them remember you and have positive feelings about you. The best collaborations are with people you genuinely enjoy talking with and spending time with. Face-time is very important, being real person and getting on with people. Don't be scared to go up to people after their talks and perhaps offer how you could help. Put yourself out there a bit. The worst they can do is walk off.

- **How do/did you sustain a career (and your sanity) on soft money/short term contracts?**

The biggest tip is to go for it and pretend like your funding goes on longer. Plan years out and ignore the short-term contract

'issue/elephant in the room'.
The situation can be so stressful, especially in a time of life when you may be considering family and financial commitments. At some point you may have to accept 0.8 FTE for a while and you will need to write lots of unsuccessful grants before you get some reward. Keep going. If you do a really good job for your boss they are always applying for more grants and it will more favourable for them to keep you on if they can. Take a good hard look at your CV and how it matches with winners of fellowships and grants. Work with supervisor to strategize over your CV.
Fellowships want leadership potential which is difficult to convey to a funding committee. Find roles which will demonstrate your leadership potential. 8 years is where you fall off a cliff so make most of the ECR funding available. Be ridiculously stubborn. Apply to everything you can. Accumulate small grants.
It is a good idea to reverse engineer, so decide where you want to be in a years' time and work backwards to figure out what you should be focusing on NOW. You need a thick skin and good self-esteem. Forget impending doom and plan for success.

- **What does leadership potential look like?**

Being PI on grants, even if small (e.g. MPPT). Being on committees, panels, journal boards, invited to talk at conferences, supervising students, putting forward symposium proposals and being involved in organisation of local events e.g. with your supervisor. These are all things that require you to be proactively developing your career and not just carrying out your supervisor's research.

- **How do you manage to supervise post-grad students when on short term contracts?**

It is super important to do teaching where you can, we are a teaching institution and although we are sometimes told otherwise, it is valued as much as research when being considered for an academic position. Approach co-ordinators and tell your supervisor and other senior members of your dept that you are seeking teaching opportunities. Don't get involved in the admin side of it if you aren't getting paid for it. Another benefit of teaching is that lecturing is the best way to get postgrad students. Honour students are a good place to start on soft money. You can transition from one lecture to a block of lectures to co-ordinating. Get tips from others to save time and energy. Be careful about taking on too much load as your priority is still research output if you are being paid 100% off research grants. Make sure you get recognised formally for co-supervision of grad students, this is very important for promotion. If you CAN employ technician before taking on students, do so, so they can be on the ground with them rather than you. Generally, for teaching, no training is given/compulsory.

Short courses are available via CLEAR if you want to hone your skills. A postgrad certificate in academic practice is also available.

- **How important was a mentor to your career progression?**

The panel discussed a mix of deliberate, planned and 'on the fly' decisions they made which helped their career progression. A good mentor will help you see which opportunities and choices are going to be advantageous. More than one mentor and different viewpoints is crucial, these could even be outside of your field of research. Mentors can spring up from places you might not expect, can organically occur. Don't feel hesitant about approaching people for mentoring. Sometimes a mentor will tell you things you don't want to hear but do take it on board as there will often be some truth in what they say. An honest opinion can be a double-edged sword but use it to your advantage.