Editorial

Mentorship in Academic Medicine: A Catalyst of Talents

Victor J Dzau,[1-3]*MD*, Khee Chee Soo,[3-5]*MBBS, MD, FRACS*

The field of medicine is complex. Its interwoven structure of clinical practice, medical education and biomedical research, coupled with intricacies of the health system, makes it challenging for one to navigate through without any help. In any academic medical centre (AMC) or hospital, there is an imperative for senior, more experienced members of the profession to provide guidance to their juniors. There is a need for mentorship, and good mentors are critical to support the enduring success of physicians, scientists and researchers.

Why Does Mentorship Matter?

Scientific evidence proves that mentoring matters. A meta-analysis conducted by Allen et al on 40 empirical studies[1] found greater objective and subjective career outcomes for those mentored, as compared to those who were not. Objective outcomes refer to tangible career measurements such as annual compensation, salary growth and self-promotion, while subjective outcomes refer to intangibles including career satisfaction and commitment, advancement expectations, as well as intention to stay in one's organisation. The research showed a clear relationship between career-related mentoring and positive career outcomes.

Other studies also suggest a positive correlation between mentoring and one's work environment. A study by Van der Weijden found that young professors who received mentorship had a more positive view of their work environment.[2] Another research on work-life balance in academic medicine found that physician-researchers with mentors felt that they had improved work-life balance.[3]

A mentor is not merely an educator who teaches medical knowledge and clinical techniques. A mentor is a role model who exemplifies medical professionalism, who befriends, advises, and inspires mentees, and imparts values that one simply cannot learn through books or the internet. Being a mentor is about having a personal relationship with a mentee, and about being willing to take a bet on someone. Through a high degree of trust, mutual respect and commitment, the impartation of wisdom, values and lifelong learning is made possible.

What's In It for Mentors?

Mentees are not the only ones who benefit from mentor-mentee relationships. Mentorship benefits mentors in many ways. One of the greatest values is in the opportunity to give back. Every experienced or successful doctor would have received help in one way or another in the course of his career, and mentorship provides the chance to give back to the organisation. It is also about contributing to the future, as mentees and newer members of the profession make up the continuum of the health system and ought to be invested in.

Other tangible benefits include attracting talent, since mentors with a good reputation naturally attract many students to work with them. The mentor-mentee relationship also allows mentors to develop their professional network and extend the influence and contribution of their science. Most importantly, mentors too, can learn from their mentees.

What Mentors Should Teach – The Science and Beyond

Aspiring clinicians and researchers have to master various essential skills—both practical ones, as well as soft skills, of which many cannot be taught in class. Practical skills include responsibility and ethics, scientific investigation, as well as grant and funding navigation. But beyond the science, there a few things in particular that mentors can impart.

First, they can help mentees navigate the health system and politics. The health system today is highly complex and ever evolving. From understanding the complexities

[1]Institute of Medicine, National Academy of Sciences, USA
[2]Duke University, USA
[3]SingHealth, Singapore
[4]Clinical, Academic & Faculty Affairs, Duke-NUS Graduate Medical School, Singapore
[5]National Cancer Centre Singapore, Singapore
Address for Correspondence: Prof Soo Khee Chee, Director's Office, National Cancer Centre Singapore, 11 Hospital Drive, Singapore 169610.
Email: soo.khee.chee@singhealth.com.sg

of the organisation and its processes, to figuring out how policies translate into practice and how multidisciplinary teams work, there is a myriad of knowledge for new or younger staff to pick up on. More often than not, being able to ask a senior "how do I do this" would put difficult things into perspective. Otherwise, young clinicians may feel perplexed or dejected after futile efforts and setbacks.

Next, mentors can provide guidance to mentees on matters relating to career planning and making career decisions for their future. Having gone ahead, mentors' experience, insight and wisdom are invaluable. They can identify what mentees love to do, point out their strengths and weaknesses, give frank feedback and inspire them to move in a certain direction. In this way, mentees are also led to discover new things about themselves and develop skills they may not know they possess. Khalil Gibran, The Prophet, once said, "If [the teacher] is indeed wise he does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind."

Lastly, mentors can role-model and offer practice advice on organisational planning and management skills, which many clinicians and scientists are less in tuned to. Time management, communication and leadership, as well as the wisdom behind running a laboratory and taking charge of people are among some of the important skills required for the running of a successful healthcare organisation or AMC.

What Makes a Good Mentor?

Every good mentor should uphold a few universal values. First, primacy of patient welfare—the deep conviction to help patients is what sustains mentors' lifelong commitment towards nurturing the next generation, and compels them to do what they do. Mentors with this conviction also pass on the value of prioritising patients to their mentees.

Intellectual nimbleness without arrogance is vital. On one hand, physicians need to exercise intellectual nimbleness and critical thinking when treating patients or doing research. Yet, should arrogance set in, it can lead to complacency and lead one away from the sense of empathy that is crucial in interpersonal relationships. Only without arrogance can one truly benefit from lifelong learning and consistently make progress.

Mentors must have a spirit of generosity. Good mentors want their mentees to succeed. They selflessly make connections and offer resources to their mentees; they believe in their mentees and relentlessly support their endeavours. Most importantly, they keep their protégés' best interests at heart.

Prof Dzau experienced this spirit of generosity with his mentor, Dr Eugene Braunwald. Prof Dzau was working at the Massachussetts General Hospital (MGH) as a cardiology fellow when Dr Braunwald asked him to take up the post of chief medical resident at Brigham and Women's Hospital. It was a great opportunity for Prof Dzau, but he did not want to give up on his research at MGH. His mentor understood the importance of his research to him, and decided to pay for a technician to keep his laboratory running. It was significant because Dr Braunwald was essentially giving money to MGH, one of Brigham and Women's biggest competitors—but out of a spirit of generosity towards his mentee.

Good mentors also believe in meritocracy and take bets on people. They look beyond visible or quantifiable measures like family background and academic results to spot the passion, potential and desirable traits in mentees.

Michael Faraday, one of the greatest scientists of the 19th century, is a good example. Faraday's discoveries of electrolysis and benzene built the foundation of science, but few people know that he came from a poor family and had little formal education. At the age of 20, Faraday attended a lecture by the chemist Humphry Davy. Faraday wanted to study with Davy and sent him 300-page notes based on his lecture. Davy took a bet on him, first hiring him as his secretary, and then as his assistant. In 1800s, this was a big bet as the English society then was especially classist, where the elite looked down on the uneducated poor. However, it was only with this "bet" that Faraday rose to greatness and made significant contributions to science.

Fostering an Ecosystem for Mentorship

Recognising the value of mentorship, many AMCs and institutions have put in place mentorship initiatives, established the concept of mentoring teams, and developed mentoring programmes for their staff.

At the SingHealth Duke-NUS AMC, for example, the Academic Medicine Research Institute recently launched an Individual Development Plan (IDP) programme for clinician scientists and researchers. The IDP is a mentorship programme that looks at developing individualised plans for individuals upon assessment of their career goals, research strengths and scientific needs. The institute then links them up with mentors, as well as a range of support programmes and experts to support them on their research journey.

The value of mentoring and being involved in mentoring relationships is undeniable. It is time to invest in such relationships and bring individuals, institutions, and ultimately medicine, to greater heights.

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