

# ISH COMMITTEE, PARTNER AND AFFILIATED SOCIETY REPORTS

## Navigating career challenges for women in hypertension research

A REPORT FROM THE ISH CAPACITY BUILDING NETWORK

A recent ISH webinar brought together three leading women in hypertension research – Tammy Brady (USA), Azra Mahmud (Pakistan), and Joanne O'Donnell (Australia) – to discuss how they have navigated career challenges, and their advice for career progression.

In the excerpts from the webinar that follow – lightly adapted from the session – ISH members Tammy, Azra and Joanne reflect on the value of supportive colleagues and networks, the importance of saying yes to opportunities, and how a career path doesn't need to be linear.

The webinar, which took place in September, was moderated by Jennifer Cluett (USA) and Debora Colombari (Brazil) both pictured below.

ISH members can watch the full webinar on demand from within the ISH Members' Area.



### Joanne O'Donnell

#### *'Find the right people to work with'*

"Working in science can be tough. From the outside it can look like constant success, but behind the scenes it can be exhausting, you never have enough time, and you feel guilty that you can't do everything at home as well as work. The only reason I have stayed in science is because I found supervisors who were kind, understood that life happens, and supported me with children in tow. My advice is: don't just choose a lab or a project. Choose the people. A supportive supervisor can matter more than the research topic. And the right team makes a massive difference."

#### *'Your career does not have to be linear'*

"My background is in a completely different field, working on cell death and inflammation - I only transitioned later into hypertension. I've also had three children during my career, and taken a year of maternity leave with each, and returned to work in a different job every time. At times it has been chaos.

"So my career has been anything but linear. Success in academia is not a straight upward curve - there are dips, pauses, relaunches. But that's not failure - that's reality."

*Joanne O'Donnell (Australia) is an NHMRC Research Fellow, Group Leader and co-deputy lab head in the Hypertension Research Laboratory at Monash University, Australia.*



## Tammy Brady

### *'Say yes to opportunities'*

"My career is an example of the importance of saying yes. For example, early in my career, a mentor asked if I could attend an FDA (US Food and Drug Administration) meeting as a pediatric voice, representing the American Society of Pediatric Nephrology. I wasn't sure at the time why they needed me there, but I said yes, and went to the meeting.

"I sat at the table, made sure to speak, and at the end someone pointed to me and said: 'We need you on our committee.' That moment changed my trajectory. I went on to co-chair that group - which oversees validation protocols for blood pressure devices - for ten years. And that role has opened countless doors since."

### *'Step forward before you feel ready'*

"Confidence doesn't magically appear - sometimes you have to speak up or step forward before you feel ready. I tell my mentees: do you think Tom Brady walks into a game saying 'I hope I win? No - he says, 'I'm going to win.' So even if you don't feel ready for something, you try to put yourself into the right mindset, and do it anyway.

And never be afraid to ask for what you want. If you don't ask, the answer is no. Even when the answer is no, people remember that you spoke up. And the next time an opportunity comes, your name comes to mind. So much of leadership and moving forward in your career is simply being willing to step forward when others hesitate."

*Tammy Brady is Professor of Pediatrics and Epidemiology at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, USA.*



## Azra Mahmud

### *'Build your own support network'*

"Sometimes it can be hard to find environments that genuinely back women when pressures rise. So instead of waiting for perfect systems, I tell young researchers: build your own safety net. Find one or two people you trust completely - even if they're outside your institution - and let them be your sounding board. You don't need dozens of mentors. You just need one person who will tell you the truth. Don't be discouraged if the structure around you isn't built for you - build your own structure."

### *'Taking on challenges helps you grow'*

"Like Tammy, I've said yes to many opportunities - maybe more than I should have over my career. And sometimes this stretches you thin. But every yes has widened my world. Saying yes to new opportunities led me from Ireland to Pakistan. Saying yes also got me into work around equity in healthcare, and improving access to healthcare in low-resource settings in Pakistan. This became a grassroots campaign. Saying yes to taking on new challenges doesn't mean you're always ready - but it means you're willing to grow, and the challenge will help you grow."

*Azra Mahmud is Professor of Clinical Research at Shalamar Institute of Health Sciences, Pakistan.*