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ISH webinar report: Paths to scientific independence: how successful researchers found their niche

A REPORT FROM THE ISH CAPACITY BUILDING NETWORK

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A recent ISH webinar brought together three leading researchers in hypertension - Muscha Steckelings (Denmark/Germany), Dinesh Neupane (USA/Nepal), and Nguelefack-Mbuyo Pami Elvine (Cameroon) - to explore how each of them found their scientific niche.

The transition to an independent scientific career – securing funding, defining a novel research identity, and moving beyond one’s mentor’s work – represents a critical challenge for early- and mid-career researchers. While developing a sustainable and fundable niche is essential, the path to achieving this often seems unclear.

In excerpts from the webinar, Muscha, Dinesh, and Elvine share practical advice for early- and mid-career researchers on how to identify and shape a research niche.

The webinar, organised by the ISH Capacity Building Network (CBN), was moderated by Debora Colombari (Brazil) and Chloe Landry (Canada) - both pictured below. ISH members can watch the full webinar on demand in the ISH Members’ Area.



Debora Colombari



Chloé Landry



Muscha Steckelings

“Watch for what is missing or unexplored in your field. There is often novelty in those gaps. Sometimes you can find a niche by merging together two areas that don’t usually sit together – that’s often where something truly new emerges.

In my case, this meant for example bringing together skin biology and hypertension –two areas that did not initially seem connected, but which we now understand influence each other.

You also need to find something you enjoy deeply, because building a niche takes time and persistence.”

Muscha Steckelings is Professor of Pharmacology in the Department of Molecular Medicine, Cardiovascular & Renal Research Unit at the University of Southern Denmark in Odense, Denmark. She is a member of the ISH Council and Coordinator of the ISH Regional Advisory Groups.



Dinesh Neupane

“Never give up – your niche is not something you discover overnight. It’s something you build step by step. And love what you do, because if you don’t, it becomes very hard to grow a meaningful scientific identity. Your niche should come from what excites you, not just what looks fashionable at any given moment.

“Your niche is not only your topic. It’s also your people. I see my own niche partly as bringing people together and making interdisciplinary collaboration happen. So build your network and soft skills, because they shape your opportunities as much as your science.”

Dinesh Neupane is an Associate Scientist at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, Johns Hopkins University, USA. His research focuses on the prevention and control of noncommunicable diseases in low- and middle-income countries, with particular emphasis on implementation research and community-based interventions. He is a Fellow of the International Society of Hypertension.



Nguelefack-Mbuyo Pami Elvine

“Listen to advice, and don’t be too bold too early – take time to understand where you can realistically position yourself. A strong niche sits at the intersection of what you like, what you are good at, and what the field needs.

“This means working on projects that are fundable and on topics that can attract support.

Join a society like ISH to network, bounce ideas around, and learn from others – that’s how you refine and sharpen your niche.”

Nguelefack-Mbuyo Pami Elvine is Associate Professor of Physiology and Pharmacology at the University of Dschang, Cameroon, where she leads a research team on cardiovascular and metabolic diseases. She is a member of the ISH Africa Regional Advisory Group.

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