Focus on Fellows

What Does a Fellow Need to Know to Build a Successful Academic Clinical Research Career? Advice From Monica Morrow, MD

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1. Choose an institution that values clinical research and has a clinical research infrastructure.

Clinical research is time consuming and may detract from your clinical practice revenue. Find out how the institution rewards and supports clinical research. Are there adequate protocol nurses and data managers? Is there appropriate informatics support? Are there databases and tumor banks from which to draw populations and samples? How are they accessed? Is your salary based

only on clinical revenue, or are things like grants, patients accrued to institutional and national clinical trials, and publication considered in your performance evaluation and compensation? Are most people engaged in clinical research or is it a rare activity? The more that clinical research is part of the daily life of your department, the greater the chances of success.

2. Get prepared.

Most people find they have some free time at the beginning of a new job. Use this time wisely. Make sure your certifications for the protection of human subjects, a necessity for anyone doing clinical research today, are up to date and comply with the standards of your new institution. Become familiar with your institutional review board and their requirements and submission policies. Prepare some talks on subjects related to your clinical research interests and volunteer to speak at departmental seminars or to local support groups. Identify areas that have sufficient patient numbers to support asking a clinical research question. Find out what other investigators, both basic and clinical, are working in your area of interest. Attend their seminars and look for areas for collaboration. Once you have an idea, review the literature in detail (actually read the articles, not just the abstracts) to develop expertise. If the field is in flux, consider writing a review article with a senior faculty mentor. Attend disease site and protocol development meetings.

3. Find a mentor.

Everyone benefits from the advice of a senior individual with shared interests. A mentor can assist you in refining your

research question, in identifying collaborators within your institution, and in submitting your work to the right places. Mentors are usually good sources of information about where to get startup grants as well. Ideally, your mentor shares your subject interest and your discipline and is someone you can interact with comfortably. But, in today's multidisciplinary world, a mentor who shares your field of interest but is trained in a different specialty is probably more valuable than someone from your own specialty who is interested in a completely different disease area. Respect your mentor's time. He or she is there to provide you with advice, not write your grants for you.

4. When opportunity knocks, don't blow it.

As someone who edits books and organizes symposia, it never ceases to amaze me that the most junior faculty are often the ones with the late submissions. As your career begins to take off, or through the help of your mentor, you will begin to receive invitations to speak and write. This is potentially a great opportunity, since everyone is always on the lookout for the next generation of bright young people. This is a chance to showcase your potential, but there are a number of ways to ensure that you won't be invited back. These include talking longer than your assigned time period, turning in written contributions after the deadline, and not adhering to the requested topic/format. All of these behaviors may be tolerated in Nobel laureates, but they are not welcome in assistant professors. Organization and discipline will allow you to prepare your talk or manuscript well in advance of the deadline. Developing good organizational skills early in your career when you have relatively few responsibilities will pay big dividends later as your career progresses and the demands on your time multiply.

Ultimately, your chance of success in academic clinical research is dependent on how hard you are willing to work. The best infrastructure and the greatest mentor will not make up for lack of effort on your part. An academic career may seem like a second full-time job in addition to your clinical practice, but the satisfaction of contributing to our knowledge about cancer management makes the work well worth the effort.

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