

Fantastic Mentors and where to find them (+how to keep them!)



Erika Strazdins, UNSW

Like medicine, the concept of a mentor dates back to Greek mythology, describing a relationship between an older more experienced adult who helps the younger individual learn to navigate the adult world and the world of work [1]. A mentor imparts knowledge (technical skills) and wisdom (social skills) in a long term relationship built on mutual trust and shared interests [2]. Mentors can provide career related support through sponsorship, protection, exposure, and coaching, largely through their senior position, experience, and connections [1]. Mentors also have an important interpersonal role in encouragement, creating confidence, and acting as a professional role model. There is a wealth of evidence that mentoring results in better carer outcomes and high job satisfaction [1, 2, 3, 4].

One barrier to the advancement of women in medicine is a lack of role models and mentors [2, 5]. Indeed, a comprehensive review of literature regarding mentoring in medicine noted that women had more difficulty finding mentors their male counterparts [4]. The gender disparity in mentoring begins early on, with a study of American medical students showing that greater numbers of males compared to females report having had a mentor during training and early years, and this trend continues further up the career ladder [4]. While some institutions have implemented formal mentoring programs to correct the disparities by gender [2, 5], the mentor-mentee relationship is thought to flourish better when achieved organically [5].

Mentors have an important interpersonal role in encouragement, creating confidence, and acting as a professional role model.

The literature on obtaining a mentor is sparse and does not include adequate evidence to make clear recommendations [4]. It is important to understand that forming a mentoring relationship is often an informal, spontaneous, gradual and dynamic process. Therefore, awkwardly asking someone to be your mentor is likely to flatter but not go forward. The following is advice not on how to force a connection, but rather some tips on how to recognise that you are forming a mentoring relationship and how you can nurture it, which is in fact how the majority of such relationships begin.

Finding a Mentor

Firstly, identify what qualities you are looking for in a mentor. This could include professional success and connections in line with your own career goals, or positive characteristics such as being a good teacher, enthusiastic, approachable, inspirational, and knowledgeable [3]. No one person will possess all of these qualities, and so it is up to you to decide which matter most.

Cultivating a Mentor

Then, take initiative to build the foundations of mentoring relationships - having a shared interest and mutual appeal [3, 4, 5]. Females in particular are often hesitant to put themselves forward in such situations [5]. You could do this through showing your genuine interest in their work, asking insightful questions, and offering to help. When you feel the time is right, specifically ask their permission to approach them again in future. "Thank you for showing me how to do X, your approach helped me to see it from a different perspective. Would you mind if I emailed you in future if I had similar questions?" or "I really enjoyed this rotation and especially got a lot out of the outpatients clinics/ theatres/ rooms. This is something I would love to look into for future. Could you let me know when the next grand rounds are/if you have some research I could help with?" Hopefully, your soon to be mentor has recognised your enthusiasm and interest, and will agree.

Keeping a Mentor

You've made it - a personal connection with your very own mentor. Your efforts however, do not stop here and you need to take initiative for driving the relationship forward in a respectful and professional manner.

- Mentors tend to be incredibly busy people, so respect their time and use it wisely. Come prepared for your interactions with them and be open to their advice and feedback.
- Successful relationships can occur whether you meet your mentor weekly or once a year. Just make each one count.
- Remember the professional nature of the mentoring relationship. Your mentor should not be someone you regularly go to complain about how you have been treated badly, not recognised or stressed. When you ask your mentor for guidance, it is better to focus on specific problems that have real solutions.
- Show some social intelligence - express your gratitude for the time and resources they have devoted to you, and make it personal with simple things such as remembering birthdays or sending thank you notes.
- When you have completed a task or achieved a goal with the help of your mentor let them know and show your gratitude. This presents another opportunity to ask for more guidance and continue the positive cycle.

For the medical student, mentoring can be a desired but elusive concept. Having courage to take initiative and making efforts towards the mentor can help create a satisfying professional relationship to guide you throughout your career.

References:

1. Allen TD, Eby LT, Poteet ML, Lentz E, Lima L. Career benefits associated with mentoring for proteges: a meta-analysis. *Journal of applied psychology*. 2004 Feb;89(1):127.
2. Mayer AP, Files JA, Ko MG, Blair JE. Academic advancement of women in medicine: do socialized gender differences have a role in mentoring?. *In Mayo Clinic Proceedings* 2008 Feb 1 (Vol. 83, No. 2, pp. 204-207). Elsevier.
3. Straus S, Sackett D, editors. *Mentorship in academic medicine*. John Wiley & Sons; 2013 Sep 27.
4. Sambunjak D, Straus SE, Marušić A. Mentoring in academic medicine: a systematic review. *Jama*. 2006 Sep 6;296(9):1103-15.
5. Mark S, Link H, Morahan PS, Pololi L, Reznik V, Tropez-Sims S. Innovative mentoring programs to promote gender equity in academic medicine. *Academic Medicine*. 2001 Jan 1;76(1):39-42.



Studying medicine will open many doors, including ours

Not everyone is eligible to be a client of BOQ Specialist. But you are.

As a medical student, you can join the numerous doctors who have chosen to trust us with their finances throughout their careers.

We've worked with the medical profession for over 25 years and because we've taken the time to know more about you, we can do more for you.

Visit boqspecialist.com.au/students to find out more.