

My Career in the Industry

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Four years ago, I left the University of California at San Francisco to join Genentech. How I came to that transition was a long process but I will try to provide a synopsis here.

At the time, I was an Assistant Professor starting on my third year of the NIH-KO8 grant. I had another grant which allowed me to hire a fantastic lab technician to help me with my research. I had protected research time and I also had attending responsibilities in the ICU and on the pulmonary consult service. I also assumed the responsibility of being the Medical Director for the High Risk Asthma Clinic at San Francisco General Hospital. My academic career was going fine. I spent the better part of my fellowship focusing on my research so that I can get research funding. Although the research that I was doing was clinically relevant, it was not clinical in nature. Rather, it was very basic science and demanded that I focus my efforts to learn basic science and research techniques. During that time of intense focus, I had all but forgotten that I was a trained physician capable of taking care of very sick patients. Getting back to patient care, I felt re-invigorated by clinical medicine and it prompted me to reconsider how I might focus my research to that which is more directly patient relevant and allow me to use both my clinical training and basic science training.

During this time, I was also going through big transitions in my personal life. In my time as a pulmonary fellow and as junior attending, I had three children. With that, my perspective of my work and career was changing. It is not that it became less important, but I felt compelled to leave home and my kids only if my work was meaningful. Whereas before, I was willing and able to work to get to the next junction in my academic career, the demand on my time and the pull from my family really caused me to re-examine the value of the work that I was doing, and whether or not I was spending the time away from my family in the place where I can be most effective and impactful. I had also come to a realization that while I enjoyed the research that I was doing and the intellectual challenge that it offered, I am a social creature and the solitariness of my work was difficult.

So, I decided that I wanted my work to be more collaborative with regular interactions and learnings from my colleagues. I also decided that I wanted to do work that was less esoteric but more directly clinically relevant. I wanted to do translational asthma research. It seemed quite simple. I met with my division chief and department chair and a host of other people to discuss my intentions, and seek advice as well as support. One day while I was doing this due diligence, I went on a company website to look at job listings, and to my surprise, found a job posting that intrigued me. I submitted my CV online. I got a call from the company soon thereafter and 4 months and a dozen interviews later, I had an offer from the company.

Not having done much clinical research, the first year in the industry was a time of steep learning curve. I had to learn the A to Z of the drug development process as well as the day-to-day work of being a medical director. Also, working on multiple teams with team members representing many different functions with so many interdependencies was a very different process from what I had been used to in the world of basic science research. Figuring out how to work to ensure success of the program by working together with, relying on, and supporting other team members to do their job well was also a learning process. Learning how to apply science and knowledge of medicine sensibly to drug development while optimizing risk benefit balance for patients in a challenging regulatory environment was also important during that first year, and continues to be critical.

In the four years since joining Genentech, I have worked on programs spanning various phases of drug development including molecules which are still in the lab, Phase I, Phase II, Phase III, and also on drugs which have already been approved and marketed. In doing this work, I have found myself surrounded with a group of very experienced, capable, and fun colleagues. I have also found managers and mentors who have chosen to invest time and energy to help me develop and succeed. And I have found work that is challenging and fun. I have found a career that is fulfilling, developing new and better drugs to help patients. I did not anticipate that I would find the work and career that I was looking for outside of academics...but I did.

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