

## INVITED EDITORIAL

# Work-life balance: a fallacy

Maple Goh

I have often pondered how to acquire the elusive 'work-life balance'. Does such a balance exist? Is it as delicate as the whisper of a butterfly's wings? Or perhaps as ephemeral as the beauty of a cherry blossom tree?

The quest for work-life balance led me on both a physical and intellectual journey as I sought to discover the ideal specialty at a perfect location. My journey took me as far south as Waihōpai (Invercargill) in my days as a medical student, to as far north as Kaitiaki, as a locum emergency medicine registrar. I had the privilege of traversing across Australasia to work in places from Hobart, the indigenous land of the Palawa peoples, to Katherine, a convergence point between the traditional lands of Jawoyn, Dagoman and Wardaman Aboriginal peoples.<sup>1,2</sup>

However, even as I embarked on these journeys, my uncertainty grew, prompting the launch of my podcast, 'Doctor NOS', in 2021. Work-life balance, like some medical specialties, felt so deeply inaccessible, and I aspired to change this. The podcast aimed to explore the varying and curvilinear careers one could take in their medical careers, from traditional specialties such as internal medicine, through to the less-trodden path of venture capitals and pharmaceuticals. Through the lens of intersectionality, I also sought to understand the meaning of work-life balance, and its definition to different people.

The construct itself has had minimal consensus on its definition. In an integrative review by Sirgy and Lee, work-life balance has been categorised into two key dimensions: firstly, engagement in roles at work and in life, and secondly, minimising conflict between work and non-work roles.<sup>3</sup> Sirgy and Lee conclude that people can achieve work-life balance through high engagement in work and non-work activities, and that role conflict arises when meeting the demand of one role comes at the expense of another.<sup>3</sup> As a result, terms such as work-life *integration* have begun to come about, in an attempt to reflect a more inclusive appraisal of this concept.<sup>4</sup> Existing literature also discusses how some job demands can enhance work-life balance, and that employees who have learned to work 'smarter' achieve an acceptable level of work-life balance.<sup>5</sup> This seems to scarily suggest that if we have not achieved such balance, it is simply the result of our own inefficiencies. Some of the literature emphasises that future directions involve technological advancements and individual levels of mindfulness and resilience as the solution.<sup>5</sup> Again, the recurring theme is that the onus is on the individual.

If we entertain this concept of work-life balance, I believe it is not a zero-sum game. Rather than viewing 'work' and 'life' as two competing forces, I liken them to the concept of *yīn* (陰) and *yáng* (陽).<sup>6</sup> The Chinese philosophy of *yīn* and *yáng* represents the complementary and interconnected forces that exist in all aspects of life.<sup>6</sup> Just as a fulfilling personal life can contribute to our professional success, disproportionate adversity in our jobs can lead to burnout and negatively affect our personal relationships. A resounding theme through many of the physicians interviewed in Doctor NOS was how much

energy, meaning and purpose their *mahi* gave them. While I cannot authentically say that charting laxatives at 3 a.m. sparked joy for me, I know that interactions with patients, colleagues, and mentors have fostered a distinct fulfilment in my own life. The synergy of work and life is particularly notable in my passion for non-profit work and refugee and migrant health. When so many aspects of clinical medicine felt morally injurious, it was my time spent working with refugees that brought me back to life. Nothing compares to seeing the excitement on someone's face as they embark on their journey of resettlement in Aotearoa after years of seeking asylum. Fundraising thousands and raising awareness for the Syrian refugee crisis during medical school was easily one of my most cherished memories. I found myself naturally drawn to these aspects of my life that gave me a sense of inner peace and moved away from parts that felt draining. It is this *yīn* and *yáng* that has led me to where I am at Harvard University and will likely guide me into my next chapter.

What I am less sure about is whether the power to have that balance rests entirely in my hands. As I peer behind the curtains at the lives of doctors around the world, it seems increasingly evident that this equilibrium is supported by our collective community. So often, I have envied my male counterparts who appear so refreshed and ready to seize the day. It made me wonder why it seemed so much easier for them to attain this status than my female colleagues. The same, perhaps, could be said for many of my minority and indigenous friends. This concept, sometimes known as 'weathering', describes the effects of systemic oppression on the body.<sup>7</sup> Dr. Geronimus argues that the insidious effects of social injustice are beyond what we could imagine.<sup>7</sup> This therefore begs the question: is work-life balance a luxury only afforded to the privileged?

There is a cliché expression that goes, 'behind every great man, there is a great woman'. This expression is thought to have started in the 1900s as part of a feminist movement, but it is so exceedingly true that an entire book, titled "Behind every great man: The forgotten women behind the world's famous and infamous" by Wagman-Geller notes at least forty chapters of great women who stood behind famous men.<sup>8</sup> If our cis-gendered heterosexual white male counterparts were to experience misogyny, racism, emotional labour, and parenting responsibilities as our female colleagues do, perhaps work-life balance would not be so achievable. If not for the support of partners carrying the mental and emotional burden, or communities rallying them on, would they feel quite so able to fulfil their purpose in this world? Despite my own cis-gendered and able-bodied privileges, I know how heavy the burden weighs to do the *mahi* required as a double minority female. At times, I feel truly weathered. If we were more equitable and empowered within our workplaces, homes, and society, it is possible that work-life balance would have a fairer distribution.

We can be passionate about the work we do, and still be stripped of energy when we are faced with ableism, racism, and misogyny in

the workplace. We can advocate for our sick leave and annual leave, and yet be met with fierce disapproval from our supervisors. We are reprimanded for having inadequate boundaries but do not have the tribes or societies that respect them. We are encouraged to prioritise ourselves but are expected to do the invisible labour of our households and workplaces. Considering our wider society's cognitive dissonance and double standards, believing that work-life balance is achievable if we were simply 'assertive' enough with our boundaries, seems akin to structural gaslighting.

In this brief journey, perhaps the most important lesson I have learned is that this balance cannot be found in a job or a place. It is not necessarily what work-life balance means to you, but what society seems to have permitted us to have. The onus of this balance has been on the individual for far too long, and I urge you to free yourself of this guilt. Rather than enhancing our lives, the mythology of this construct has only sought to create failures where such failures do not exist. Find a career that brings you that inner peace and a community that celebrates you as a person, but do not let this illusory objective mislead you in defining your success.

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#### About the author

> Dr. Maple Goh is a physician passionate about refugee and migrant health, with extensive experience across Australasia working in multiple settings, including at Te Ahuru Mōwai o Aotearoa (Mangere Refugee Resettlement Centre). She graduated from University of Otago in 2018 from a Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery with distinction. She then pursued her Master of Public Health from Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health in 2024, as a recipient of the Frank Knox Fellowship and William Georgetti scholarship. Dr. Goh currently works at Brigham and Women's Hospital and Harvard Humanitarian Initiative, focusing on global health, particularly infectious disease outbreaks and health systems strengthening and in low- and middle- income countries.

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