

INVITED EDITORIAL

Work-life balance

Art Nahill

Work-life balance. The concept sounds so wholesome and sensible, doesn't it? It sounds like a simple problem of maths: if there are x hours in a day and Doctor A spends x hours at work, how many hours are left over for Doctor A to live their life? The word 'balance' conjures up quaint images of old-fashioned scales: 'work' on one side, exactly offset by 'life' on the other. Google the term 'work-life balance in medicine' and you will find hundreds of articles describing exactly how to achieve it. In one article, published in *Medical Economics*¹ (of all places!), the means to reach this nearly mythical state have been distilled down to seven easy steps. While some articles suggest a few more steps, others suggest a few less, all claim to offer solutions. Why, then, has this balance proven so hard to find? Why does everyone seem to be burning out faster than a wet match in a windstorm?

News flash: finding work-life balance is a bit like finding an affordable parking spot in the Auckland CBD - it's not going to happen. If work and life act as two competing demands on your limited time, you will always feel you should be doing more of one when doing the other. Instead of trying to tame the unicorn of work-life balance, what we should be striving for is a better work-life *integration*.

What, you might rightly ask, does *that* even mean? Who are you to criticise the conventional wisdom of Google?

As for the first question, I will loosely define work-life integration as learning to love what you are doing, wherever you are doing it, and giving the task in front of you the miracle of your full attention. Find work that you value, hopefully even *love*. As a doctor, you're probably going to spend a lot of time working, and this unavoidable fact will impact the kind of person you become. Surround yourself with good people, and when you are not doing what you love in the hospital or clinic, then give them the love and attention *they* deserve. Although binge-watching *Breaking Bad* on Netflix or checking your emails twenty times an hour might be tempting, you (and your loved ones) will undoubtedly benefit more from learning the names of native trees, knitting a woolly jumper, writing a novel, composing an opera or even birdwatching.

A sage piece of advice I was given early in my career is this: when you hear yourself saying, "I don't have time anymore to (insert here any activity that you love)," that is *exactly* when you need to make time to do it. If, for example, you have a creative passion like writing, painting, playing the saxophone, breakdancing, ice sculpting, chain-saw juggling, origami, or whatever — *never* give it up because to do so will undoubtedly impoverish you. You may come to resent the high price your work has 'cost' you, and then everyone, even your patients, will suffer. By all means, take up wood-working like my good friend Nic, who makes lots of beautiful and useful things (though be forewarned, this activity seems to require a number of loud and frighteningly sharp power tools). Or swim ridiculously long distances in the ocean, like Lucille, Anne, and Ingo, who do so without a wetsuit, even in winter (OK, you may not need to do THAT, exactly). Learn to quilt or bake sour-

dough bread, like Robin. Or stand in the clear Motueka River like David, fly-fishing (strictly catch and release, of course). Play netball (though, no offense, this game seems like basketball with all the fun bits taken out). Get your hands filthy in a garden. Or write poetry (it doesn't even need to rhyme). Don't surrender your identity without a fight.

Live and work *deliberately*. Observe and listen with care. Practise, and then, practise some more. Embrace the privilege and rewards of your chosen speciality but listen (without interruption!) to the stories your patients are trying to tell you.

You are not the false dichotomy of work and everything else that traditional dogma would have you believe. You are a magnificent montage of everything you do and love. Be an active participant in your own life, and you will be a better doctor. Nurture yourself, those you love, and the things that matter to you, whether others would pigeon-hole them as 'work' or 'whatever is left over'. As Mary Oliver asks each of us at the end of her poem, *The Summer Day*, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do/with your one wild and precious life?"

As for the second question, I am someone who, once upon a time, berated himself for failing to accomplish what sounded like the easily achievable goal of work-life balance. I felt like a failure. I read articles and followed their recommendations: I practiced saying no, setting limits, taking my allotted holidays, and exercising regularly. Those things were, by themselves, not enough. I still found myself feeling guilty for not working hard enough at my job and not "living" hard enough at home. It was not until I began, with the help of mentors and role models, to craft a sustaining and sustainable career that the guilt inherent in the dichotomous work-life model started to dissipate. Something else wondrous began to occur: my 'work' and 'the rest of my life' began to weave themselves together in synergy rather than in competition. I am not always successful. Some days and weeks I still fail. However, I strive each day to bestow upon whoever and whatever is in front of me the gift of careful attention, to live deliberately. Oh, and along the way, I have also learned to navigate public transport into the city, having forever abandoned the quixotic quest for an affordable carpark.

References

1. Hanson L. 7 ways to find more work-life balance as a physician [Internet]. *Medical Economics*; 2022 [cited 2024 July 28]. Available from: <https://www.medicaleconomics.com/view/7-ways-to-find-more-work-life-balance-as-a-physician>

About the author

> Art Nahill is a general physician, clinical educator, and writer based in Tamaki Makaurau. He has a special interest in mentorship, metacognition, and clinical reasoning.

Correspondence

Dr Art Nahill: imreasoning@gmail.com