

Leaning in to life

Professor Billie Bonevski is a world-renowned smoking cessation researcher and the mother of two. But don't talk to her about work/life balance

PROFESSOR Billie Bonevski doesn't believe in work/life balance. Or at least, if it does exist, she doesn't do it.

"I don't balance," she tells the *MJA*.

As chair of the University of Newcastle's Faculty of Health and Medicine Gender Equity Committee, Prof Bonevski is passionate about helping women in her profession.

"It's really important to me because I think we're all struggling with it, and it's particularly bad for women. Hopefully [what the committee does] helps our new crop of women coming through."

Prof Bonevski is a behavioural scientist and a National Health and Medical Research Council career development fellow and researcher, whose smoking cessation programs are being implemented globally. She and her colleagues have a letter published in this issue of the *MJA*.

Her career began with the books of British neurologist Oliver Sacks.

"*The man who mistook his wife for a hat* – fascinated me," she says. "By the time I was leaving high school my intention was to be a clinical neuropsychologist."

She took on a Bachelor of Arts, majoring in psychology, at UON, and was awarded first class honours with her thesis on frontal lobe disorders in obsessive compulsive disorder. Newcastle didn't offer a clinical neuropsychology course at that time – "I would have had to go the University of Sydney".

Instead she went to work in the UON faculty of medicine as a research assistant in "behavioural science in relation to medicine".

"I was taking my psychology training and applying it to health behaviours. Within 6 months I was offered the opportunity to do my PhD. I took about a day to think about it and decided, why not?"

Her thesis involved working with GPs to develop a complete program to deliver preventive care in general practice – smoking cessation advice, alcohol advice, reducing benzodiazepine prescribing, cervical screening and blood pressure screening.

After her PhD was awarded in 1997, Professor Bonevski "moved in a completely different direction".

Her first post-doctoral project was with the Cancer Council NSW, where she worked to develop the first needs survey for cancer patients.

"It was the first time anyone had thought to ask cancer patients what they needed," she says. "Sometimes it was more information, sometimes it was something as simple as better parking, better waiting rooms, financial assistance."

"It was implemented across all oncology health centres in New South Wales, hundreds of patients. It was really exciting."

The needs assessment tool is the most highly cited of Professor Bonevski's work to this day, and has been translated into six languages.

Family life took over for a while, and after returning from "a long maternity leave" in 2008, the Cancer Council NSW's focus was on smoking cessation programs for disadvantaged and high-risk groups.

"I'm not often the initiator of the work I do," she says.

"It's the research end user – whether that's the Cancer Council, or VicHealth, or whoever – and I take their problem and work out how can we solve this problem."

"Everything I do is very applied – translational. When I do a research project I think about how it will impact on the GP down the road,



Professor
Billie Bonevski

or on health policy, or on clinical practice guidelines.

"I'm not really a 'blue sky' person. I have a lot of community partners and I serve them and provide solutions."

Does she ever regret not following her original choice of clinical neuropsychology?

"Yes," she admits. "Sometimes I catch myself thinking 'gee, I'd like to do that some time'."

When she's not working, Professor Bonevski runs, and looks after her two sons.

"We're a soccer family, so it can be full on."

Which brings us back to the work/life balance question.

"You don't balance," she says. "You do what needs doing most on the day. Some days it's all work, and some days it's all about the kids."

"It's all life."

"We end up chasing our tails and buying into a lot of angst, trying to pursue work/life balance and it always eludes us because it doesn't exist."

"My advice is to do as Sheryl Sandberg, the chief operating officer of Facebook, advises – lean in to whatever confronts you, go with it, and do the best you can."

Cate Swannell

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