

Learning from the greats

Grant Blashki has a simple philosophy – learn from the best ...

GRANT Blashki's advice to medical students is very simple.

"Find awesome people and hang around with them," he tells the *MJA*. "It's availability bias. Hang around long enough and eventually someone will say 'oh you're here, can you do this for me?', and away you go."

It's a philosophy that he has put into practice from day one of his medical career, collecting a distinguished list of mentors along the way.

Associate Professor Blashki is a general practitioner, an academic currently affiliated with the Nossal Institute for Global Health and the Melbourne Sustainable Society Institute, both at the University of Melbourne, an educator and an advocate on climate change – he was a co-founder of Doctors for the Environment Australia – and for mental health issues. His most recent appointment is as lead clinical advisor with *beyondblue*.

"I have a big appetite for things," he says. "I enjoy doing interesting things."

Caring about mental health is in A/Professor Blashki's blood. His father, Tim Blashki, was a GP-turned-psychiatrist who was the lead author of the world's first randomised control trial of the management of depression by GPs, published in the *British Medical Journal* in January 1971.¹

"We have a great relationship and we've given talks and presented papers over the years," says Blashki Jnr. "And then as a GP I found, as many GPs do, that a lot of the patients I was seeing were coming in with mental health issues – ranging from severe to mild, everyday problems."

He earned his MBBS from Monash University in 1991, his Fellowship of the Royal Australian

College of GPs in 1998, his PhD (*Education of general practitioners on depressive disorder: the efficacy of a distance education program on attitudes, knowledge and practices – a randomised controlled trial*) in 2003, and a Diploma of Australian Institute of Company Directors in 2011.

Mentors, he says, have been critical to his career, and his satisfaction with it.

"All of us tend to over attribute our own efforts to our own success when really it's the great mentors, colleagues and supporters that help us to achieve," he says.

Professor John Murtagh and Professor Leon Piterman, both from Monash, Professors Jane Gunn and Jane Pirkis, and Professor Rob Moodie, all from the University of Melbourne, Professor Ian Hickie from the Brain and Mind Centre at the University of Sydney, and the late Professor Tony McMichael from the Australian National University, are just some of the "awesome people" A/Prof Blashki has "hung around" with over the years.

"Building relationships with great people is so important," he says.

Perhaps one of the most influential in his life is Helen Sykes, AM, director of Future Leaders² and president of the Trust for Young Australians.³ Together they have written four books – *Life surfing, life dancing* (on mental health); *Dancing in the rain* (on non-communicable diseases); *Living life, loving life* (about ageing); and *Genes for life* (about genomics). A fifth, *Fragility and hope*, about the great successes of science in improving the world, will be released this year.

The book, he says, will be a counterpoint to the flood of "bad news" the media delivers to young people.

"Don't be blinded by the media. Look how far we've gone [with

developing treatments and technological advances]. There are fantastic things happening all the time.

"You can probably tell that I'm slightly optimistic," A/Prof Blashki laughs.

The day after talking with the *MJA*, he was off to China, one of three trips a year to that country.

"The Chinese government is committed to training 100 000 general practitioners over the next decade," he says. "They want to strengthen their primary care system, and they want us to train their GP leaders to increase their capacity.

"It was a bit of a culture shock initially, but I have a good mentor – Professor Hui Yang from Monash University – who helps a lot and is a fantastic guide."

After a year off following his first year of medical studies, during which he was a drummer in a band – "we were somewhere between very unsuccessful and completely unsuccessful" – he "begged" the Dean to be allowed back into the course.

"Thank goodness he let me back in," A/Professor Blashki says. "Seriously, get to know great people."

References

1. <https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2009/191/2/early-general-practice-trial-antidepressants-interview-trialist-tim-blashki>
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