

Mentorship INTERVIEW

Presented by IFCC Young Scientists Task Force

AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. PRAVEEN SHARMA (THE MENTOR)
AND DR. PRASENJIT MITRA (THE MENTEE)

Dr Praveen Sharma is currently Professor and Head of Department of Biochemistry, and Controller of Examinations and Dean (Research) at The All India Institute of Medical Sciences, in Jodhpur, India.

Working as a Mentor

When considering the most valuable aspect of this mentor-mentee relationship, Dr Sharma remarked:

I think trust and honesty is the basic foundation for any relationship. A mentor-mentee relationship is no different. The mentee should have full faith in the expertise of the mentor, while the mentor must be eager to help nurture the potential of the mentee in the best possible way. Once established, this relationship adds a lot of value to the career of both mentor and mentee.

Dr Sharma, who has such an outstanding experience as a mentor, noted: "I have more than 40 years' experience of teaching Clinical Biochemistry and Laboratory Management in various Institutes. During this time, I have mentored many postgraduate, doctoral and post-doctoral trainees." Moreover, on the question of how to be a good mentor and maintain a good mentoring relationship, Dr Sharma remarked: "I think the zeal to help others and the satisfaction in seeing your mentees grow and shape up their career is a must. I don't think there is a pre-requirement for being a good mentee or a mentor. Once a relationship of mentor-mentee starts, it is on the mentor to shape the relationship and help the mentee in every possible way in their career path." Continuing his evaluation, Dr Sharma remarked:

It's not just a career, mentors can also teach their mentees life skills that could help the transformation of young laboratorians to be future leaders of the field. A mentor-mentee relationship should be bi-directional and open for any type of discussion. Therefore, being able to listen to any problems that the mentee has and trying to resolve them in the best possible way, would definitely help boost the relationship.

Mentorship is clearly extremely important, and when asked how the mentorship program can help young scientists and laboratorians in their career, Dr Sharma retorted: "I think the mentorship program is a great initiative for helping young scientists and early career laboratorians. Knowing about the mentor-mentee relationship will help budding young scientists get a clear perspective regarding searching, selecting and approaching a mentor."

And when it comes to young scientists seeking out a mentor, Dr Sharma believes that:

Mentor: **Prof. Praveen Sharma**

PhD (Med), FACBI, FAMS
Professor and Dept. Head,
Department of Biochemistry
Controller of Examinations
and Dean (Research)
All India Institute of Medical
Sciences, Jodhpur

Mentee: **Dr. Prasenjit Mitra**

MD
Assistant Professor
Department of Biochemistry
All India Institute of Medical
Sciences, Jodhpur

Interview conducted by:

Dr. Joe El-Khoury, DABCC, FAAC

Core Member IFCC-TFYS
Assistant Professor,
Laboratory Medicine
Director,
Clinical Chemistry
Laboratory Medicine
Co-Director, Clinical Chemistry

Mentorship INTERVIEW

"The major challenges [facing young scientists] are lack of clarity in shaping a career pathway; lack of guidance in pursuing quality research; and lack of infrastructure for proper training in modern cutting-edge technology."

∞ Dr Sharma

In today's era of modern information technology, it is easier to search and know about eminent scientists and their expertise, field of work etc. Further, attending conferences, congresses, workshops or similar training programs, gives them an opportunity to meet new people who can be potential mentors. In addition, social media is another opportunity to identify, network, and choose potential mentors.

When examining the common challenges that young scientists currently face, Dr Sharma notes: "The major challenges are lack of clarity in shaping a career pathway; lack of guidance in pursuing quality research; and lack of infrastructure for proper training in modern cutting-edge technology."

Advice for Young Laboratorians

Dr Sharma advices:

Always look for opportunities from various sources which would allow exposure to recent trends in clinical chemistry and laboratory medicine. Young laboratorians should try pursuing research, and keep on publishing regularly, in order to maintain a proper track record. I think that attending Conferences and Congresses is a must, particularly for laboratorians from developing countries. There are a lot of opportunities for availing travel grants and obtaining fellowships to participate in conferences. One should always keep trying. Conferences are places where young scientists can gain exposure to many eminent scientists.

THE MENTEE

Background

When reflecting on his background, Dr Prasenjit Mitra, who specialises in Clinical Biochemistry, and works as an Assistant Professor, in the Department of Biochemistry at the All Institute of Medical Sciences, Jodhpur, India, spoke about his successful pathway up from Senior Residency.

The Mentor's Perspective

As his mentorship has had such a positive impact on his career in clinical biochemistry, Dr. Prasenjit Mitra, remarked:

My first meeting with Prof Sharma was at a job interview when I applied for Senior Residency in the All Institute of Medical Sciences Jodhpur. Ever since I was accepted for the role, and Prof Sharma agreed to become my mentor, he served as a truly invaluable guide for me, helping me fully understand the department's routine academic work. Moreover, Prof Sharma empowered me gain to an excellent understanding of good laboratory services. Further, in terms of research, he gave me opportunities to liaise with other faculties of clinical departments to pursue research in my area of interest.

Mentorship INTERVIEW

“A mentor may guide the young scientist in understanding and shaping up their career. Moreover, a mentor can help in introducing the mentee to other eminent scientists of the field, which may eventually lead to student exchange for betterment of the mentee.”

≈ Dr Mitra

Adding to the plethora of benefits that can be gained through having a mentor, Dr Mitra noted:

Prof Sharma guided me so that I had a better understanding of laboratory management. I have successfully completed my internal auditor and International Laboratory Assessor course during this time. And now, after four and a half years as a mentee, even as a faculty member, I am still being guided by him so that I can improve myself and shape my professional career in a better way.

When asked about the general advantages of working with a mentor, Dr Mitra remarked:

As a young scientist, it is difficult to have clarity on how to progress in their academic and research career. A mentor with his vast experience in the field may guide the young scientist in understanding and shaping up their career. Moreover, a mentor can help in introducing the mentee to other eminent scientists of the field, which may eventually lead to student exchange for betterment of the mentee.

Advice to Fellow Students About Mentorship

Dr Mitra considered the advice he could give to his peers who are also interested in seeking out mentors such as Dr Sharma. The former noted:

Peers should be pro-active. If they don't try, they will never even achieve anything. But if they keep on trying, they will definitely find opportunities that could completely change their career. In today's world of social media and modern information technology, I think that reaching out for mentors is quite easy. Moreover, attending conferences is a must for the young scientists.

Dr Mitra continued:

There are a lot of opportunities for availing scholarships, travel grants and fellowships, and one must try to avail them. There are several programmes that may help in identifying a mentor and working with him or her. For example, IFCC has a student exchange program that has already helped many students go and work in laboratories in different countries, thereby allowing them to meet new mentors and develop their professional careers.

My Relationship with My Mentor

Discussing his relationship with his mentor, Dr Mitra remarked:

My relationship with Prof Sharma has grown over the last four and a half years. He has always given me time, understanding, space, guidance, advice; and possibly everything that a young fellow would need at this vital point in his/her career. He has not only

Mentorship INTERVIEW

showed me opportunities which have allowed me to boost my academics; he has also shown me how to improve my laboratory works and research activities. Moreover, he has taught me several life skills which have not just helped my career, they have totally transformed me. There are no restrictions for me if I need to approach him for any kind of problems that I face in my day to day life. He has always been there to guide me, and that's the best part of our relationship.

Describing how his mentor helped him accomplish his project, Dr Mitra noted:

Prof Sharma is the Director of The National Referral Centre of Lead Project, in India, Jodhpur. The centre focusses on spreading awareness about lead and conducting research on lead toxicity. When I was a senior resident, he involved me in some of the work undertaken by the centre. I have gradually taken part in various research projects in the molecular pathogenesis of Lead Toxicity under his supervision. I wrote a project on Th17 and the Kynurenine pathway in depression and suicidality. Moreover, Prof Sharma gave me thorough inputs and suggestion on making the project better.

Dr Mitra continued:

Eventually, I was awarded the Indian Council of Medical Research – Nurturing Clinical Scientist (ICMR-NCS) fellowship for the same. Further, there are a number of research projects from various departments in our Institute for which Prof Sharma has always given his suggestions for proper conduct. We wrote a review article "Clinical and Molecular Aspects of Lead Toxicity: An update," that has been published in Critical Reviews in Clinical Laboratory Sciences. Prof Sharma did all he could to help me write the review and improve the quality of the manuscript. Another area in which he has mentored me, is in regard to organizing conferences and educational activities. I was part of the organizing committee of 15th Asia Pacific Federation of Clinical Chemistry and Laboratory Medicine Congress 2019, at Jaipur, India. He mentored me throughout the preparatory phases, from which I have understood the processes of organizing such a big event.