

THE NAMS MENTORSHIP PROGRAM

A journey of love: the Wild-Farhi mentor-mentee pair in The North American Menopause Society Mentorship Program

Robert A. Wild was a member of The North American Menopause Society (NAMS) Research Affairs Committee and therefore involved in the initial planning of the NAMS Mentorship Program. He recognizes the effort and work required by a mentor and mentee but characterizes it as “a journey of love” that ultimately is a very positive experience. Bringing the first mentor-mentee class into reality required some “learning as you go” and understanding of individual expectations and abilities, and thus, the importance of the inaugural class in this program and the value of my interviews with each mentor-mentee pair in establishing a foundation and guidelines for the future.

Bob Wild, a lifelong academician, faced a daunting challenge in the NAMS Mentorship Program; he was paired with a private practitioner mentee with very little research experience. The story of the Wild-Farhi mentor-mentee pairing is unique, and I believe it will resonate with both academicians and private practitioners.

After medical school at the University of Missouri, Bob completed his residency training in obstetrics-gynecology at Harvard. A tour of duty at the Keesler Air Force Base in Biloxi, MS, was followed by a fellowship in reproductive endocrinology at the University of Tennessee in Memphis and a faculty appointment at Pennsylvania State University in Hershey. He moved to Oklahoma City in 1988, where, during his faculty years in the Division of Reproductive Endocrinology and the Department of Obstetrics and Gynecology at the Oklahoma University Health Sciences Center, he earned a master’s degree in public health and a doctoral degree in clinical epidemiology and biostatistics. He now holds several appointments at Oklahoma University Health Sciences Center: Professor of Obstetrics and Gynecology, Adjunct Professor of Medicine (in Cardiology), Adjunct Professor of Biostatistics/Clinical Epidemiology, and Chief of the Gynecology Service at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center. Despite wearing these many hats, Bob has the hard-earned luxury of having about 50% of his time available



for administration, teaching, and research. So here was this very trained, highly experienced, well-published academician thrust into a scientific mentor-mentee relationship with a private practitioner.

Before entering medical school, Mary Schupp Farhi earned a master’s degree in public health and epidemiology from the University of Minnesota School of Public Health. In the midst of her master’s degree program, Mary made the decision to continue her education in medical school, thinking she would return to the field of public health. However, she discovered a new passion during her student rotation in obstetrics and gynecology. After graduating from the University of Minnesota Medical School, Mary completed her residency training in obstetrics and gynecology at Rush Presbyterian, St. Luke’s Medical Center, in Chicago, and she entered private practice more than 15 years ago. Ten years ago, Mary founded the Comprehensive Women’s Center, in two offices in suburbs of Chicago—Hoffman Estates, IL, and Wheeling, IL—and with a focus on prevention and wellness; she stopped obstetrics 6 years ago. She works in community hospitals that do not have residency programs.

THE PROJECT

A project had to be found. Some mentees have been incorporated into ongoing projects under the mentor’s direction. Bob’s experience with Mary was unusual and bears emphasizing. After discussing shared interests with Bob such as metabolic problems and obesity, it was Mary’s creative proposal to use data from her own patients to explore relationships between vitamin D levels and possible modifying influences.

Bob likened the challenge of working with Mary to that encountered in his daily activities working with residents. Mary had to learn some basic fundamentals, such as what an institutional review board is and how one works with an institutional review board. Bob had to teach her how to know if a vitamin D assay is reliable and what quality control is.

Only modern systems of communication (e-mail and appropriate software) made it possible to connect Oklahoma and Illinois, creating an elbow-to-elbow working environment. However, as Bob pointed out, “there is no substitute for meeting one-to-one, made possible by spending time together at the NAMS Annual Meeting. Software is like driving a car; you can get into a wreck easily and quickly.”

Once on the trail, Mary was relentless, retrieving every possible bit of data from her charts, an experience that inevitably identified even more variables, and then transferring the data to spreadsheets to allow statistical analysis. One of Bob’s rewards was the obvious excitement that emerged when Mary began to pursue a path effectively. “To me, it was neat that our project was Mary’s idea. It’s one thing to plug someone in to someone else’s idea, but it’s another when it is a process beginning with simple questions like what can I do, what is a question I can answer.”

The work culminated in a poster presentation at the 2010 NAMS Annual Meeting: “Association of Body Mass Index With Response to Vitamin D3 Supplements.” Mary had to learn how to use an Excel spreadsheet and even how to make a poster, but she was thoroughly rewarded, standing by her poster and responding to questions and comments.

THE CHALLENGE

Can a private practitioner consistently and independently mine his or her own practice experience and data to yield publications that contribute to the knowledge of a discipline? If you pick up any medical journal published in the 1960s and earlier, the bulk of the articles are just that: lessons derived by clinicians from their own experience. However, analysis of data and a successful journey through the peer-review system are more sophisticated and demanding today. Add to that the difficulty in finding time to spare for any nonclinical activities, and you have an intimidating challenge. Bob Wild emphasizes that the first requirement is commitment and desire. Funding can be found through local foundations and organizations. If time can be found, hustling yields results.

The Wild-Farhi pairing is a lesson that hopefully will open doors for others. An intimidating challenge can be overcome. As Bob said, “You have to take small steps. It was really a kick to see Mary start at zippo, spend all those hours of work, and to see her poster at the NAMS meeting. Even though I had fear and trepidation over the many hurdles facing Mary, her motivation got her through it, taking one bite at a time with a growing excitement.” Also, it culminated in a quality poster that filled both Bob and Mary with pride and satisfaction.

I asked Mary what prompted her interest in the NAMS Mentorship Program. “Part of it was where my practicing was taking me: a greater interest in menopause and a growing appreciation for NAMS as a great resource, starting with my first NAMS meeting in 2007. When the opportunity for the NAMS Mentorship Program became available, it was a nat-

ural attraction for my love of challenging myself with new things, and it was an opportunity to see if I could do this.” She said that the first meeting of the pairs in the Program was a little overwhelming, realizing that she was the only one in private practice. Although confronted with having to learn new procedures and a learning curve that she recognized was different for an individual in her circumstances, she concluded that she loved the experience.

Time is a valuable commodity in Mary’s life. She has a family with six children, all boys, 10 to 17 years old. “I have a very dichotomous life; my evenings are filled with male influence and my days are spent with women.” “You just have to make time, but when there are things that you enjoy, you find the time. If you have a passion for something, you need to try. A private practitioner has something unique to offer, a different perspective that comes from seeing a lot of patients. There must be more practitioners out there with similar observations and stories like mine, and given the opportunity, can contribute to our body of knowledge. I would love to keep traveling down this road. I like to tell my patients we have to find health where we don’t expect to find it, especially in this busy life.” Mary and her husband, a certified Yoga instructor, recently opened a Yoga studio, and she would like to explore approaches to health in this venue.

CONCLUSIONS

I asked Bob Wild whether it is worthwhile for NAMS to encourage mentor-mentee pairings between an academician and a private practitioner. Bob pointed out that this cannot be measured only by the emergence of a publication or successful National Institutes of Health funding. An impact on an individual’s appreciation and outlook regarding science is a valuable outcome, affecting not only the quality of medical practice but also an individual’s contribution to a community.

Mary expressed her gratitude to NAMS. “NAMS has had a great impact on my practice and in my life. I am especially grateful for the opportunity provided by the Mentorship Program, and for Bob’s patience, sense of humor, and encouragement.”

Bob concluded that what NAMS offers is communication with good people. “But it is important to make it clear at the start that the mentee not the mentor is the driver. The mentor’s job is to assist along the trip, but the driving cannot be done for the mentee. It is only with this kind of relationship that satisfaction comes from a job well done. It does your heart good.”

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