

The balance between work and family

We all have a problem keeping a balance between work and family life. The Johannesburg psychiatrist, Bernard Levinson once wrote:

“Doctors’ children are very special. They grow up in the hurly-burly of telephone calls, consultations and emergencies. A world in which every person has priority over their own needs. In a setting of such intense caring, the doctor’s children often have to wait”.

The balance between work and family has never been easy for a profession whose demands are irregular and often spread over a time frame, which is not only long but also unpredictable. Societal pressures and expectations often unwittingly program us into a way of life that puts us onto a never-ending treadmill. The pressure is often more on female doctors who have increasingly entered the profession of medicine over the last half century. They often have to divide themselves simultaneously into quarters (almost hung, drawn and quartered!) between work, wife and the traditional roles of housekeeper and mother.

Much depends on what stage of our life-cycle we are presently in, such as intern, registrar, or middle-aged practitioner. You may look around and find there is not much you can alter. We did a short workshop once on the question: If you can change nothing at work what would be the changes you could make on a personal level? Sometimes time management comes out as a life decision rather than a work decision. Identifying and finding “time” usually needs some difficult decisions around income and life-style requirements but there is always time for fishing. I remember one evening going down with my youngest son to one of the dams on his grandparents’ farm in the Drakensberg. He must have been about six years old at the time. I had this old fishing rod and some spinners and we were after large-mouth bass. I made a couple of casts and on the third one I realised that I had hooked a bass and it was firmly on the end of the line. I handed the rod over to the lad and asked him to look after it and said that I had to check for something in the cooler box. It did not take long before there was some yelling and great excitement as, with some help, he pulled in his first catch. We cut a long stalk of stiff veld grass and threaded it through the fish’s gills so that he could carry it up to the farm house for inspection and admiration by the assembled family and retainers. I had to dissuade him from sleeping with it

next to his bed that night. One needs to have taken the time off in order to have these memories.

There was one of those folk songs in the 1970s called *Cat’s in the Cradle* by Harry Chapin about the relationship between a son and his father. In relation to his own son, he once said “frankly, this song scares me to death”.

It tells the story of the father who is too busy to spend time with his son.

*My son turn 10 just the other day
He said “thanks for the ball, Dad; come on, let’s play
Can you teach me to throw
I said, “not today, I got a lot to do.”*

The refrain in the song goes something like:

*“I don’t know when, but we will get together
and then we will have a good time”*

It is a paean to a life of postponement now common in most of our lives until we realise that the time has gone by and the son or daughter is asking for the car keys.

It is the friction between wanting to provide the best life for our families and having the money and time to achieve it – especially for the people who are the most important to us.

Interestingly, by our behaviour, we seem to set a repetitive generational cycle.

At the end of the song the father is missing his son and the wheel has turned.

*“I’ve long since retired, and my son’s moved away
I called him up just the other day
I said “I would like to see you if you don’t mind”
He said, “I’d love to, Dad, if I could find the time
You see, my new job’s a hassle, and the kid’s got the flu
But it’s sure nice talking to you, Dad
It’s been sure nice talking to you”.*

So let’s cancel next week’s bookings and maybe the week after that too. As the Canadian physician, Sir William Osler said, “the future is today”.

I hope she does not forget the child’s lunch.

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