CAREER PATH

Susan Desmond-Hellmann

By her own admission, Susan Desmond-Hellmann has had a "chaotic" career path, but she believes that the skills and experience she has amassed along the way have allowed her to do what's really important to her — to get better drugs to cancer patients. It is clear that she has tremendous respect and regard for cancer sufferers and, as President of Product Development at Genentech, she really is making an impact on their treatment. Since joining the company in 1995 she has been credited by Genentech colleagues and outsiders alike as the key force behind the development of several innovative new anticancer drugs.

As an intern at the University of California in San Francisco (UCSF), USA, Desmond-Hellmann became interested in cancer research and undertook a fellowship in oncology. But unlike many of her peers who went into the lab, she chose to do her research project in the clinic, and obtained a Masters degree in Public Health, focusing on epidemiology and biostatistics. Around the same time, there was a rise in HIV-associated malignancies in San Francisco and so she chose to investigate the epidemiological aspects of Kaposi's sarcoma. On her return to the UCSF faculty, the Rockefeller Foundation asked Desmond-Hellmann and her husband, an infectious diseases doctor at UCSF, to move to Uganda to study heterosexual transmission of HIV. They jumped at the opportunity, and spent 2 years researching and teaching at Makere University in Kampala. "It was a fantastic experience," she says. "It was challenging, but there's a wonderful medical community in Uganda and we felt the work was important and meaningful."

Arriving back at UCSF, however, Desmond-Hellmann says things had changed. "We didn't have much of a career left, truth be told!" Feeling overwhelmed by starting from scratch with little mentorship or support at the university, she and her husband moved to Kentucky to do private practice. But Desmond-Hellmann soon became frustrated at the lack of treatment options for her cancer patients and was driven to do something about it. "I loved my patients but did not enjoy private practice. I thought it was the wrong job for me. We needed better weapons against cancer and I wanted to be a part of that." So when Bristol-Myers Squibb (BMS) recruited her husband to work on one of their HIV drugs, Desmond-Hellmann joined the company's oncology team to work on the development of Taxol for breast cancer.

There, she felt she had finally found her true vocation. "I absolutely loved it! It was a great fit for my skills. I was working with Marcel Rozencweig, Renzo Canetta and Steve Carter, who, in my mind, were the architects of the chemotherapy I had been using in the clinic. They really knew how to develop drugs and conduct clinical trials to get a cancer drug approved."

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After 2 years of what she admits was a steep learning curve at BMS, Desmond-Hellmann got the call from Genentech. "Fred Desauvage and Dan Eaton had just identified thrombopoietin as a key mediator of making platelets, and I was asked to take it into the clinic," she recalls. "I was so struck by the beautiful research and how science-driven Genentech was — and, frankly, it was also a chance to come back home." So in 1995 she and her husband moved back to California, where she took up a clinical scientist position.

Desmond-Hellmann thrived in the 'start-up' atmosphere of Genentech and quickly worked her way up the executive ladder via several senior clinical positions before taking on her current role in March 2004. She thinks her 'try anything' attitude and passion for helping cancer patients are the reason for her success. "When I did a rotation in oncology I was struck by how wonderful and brave cancer patients are. It's a life-changing moment for someone to be told they have cancer. So I feel this incredible commitment to being part of something that can help them."

What advice would she give to others wanting to follow her career path? "Do something you're passionate about and that challenges you. Ask yourself 'What will I learn from this?' Every day I learn something new at Genentech, and even though I didn't have a very well laid out career path, I think I've learned and benefited from everything I did."

Desmond-Hellmann has been nominated as a 'Woman to Watch' by *The Wall Street Journal* and one of the 'Most Powerful Women in Business' by *Fortune* magazine. Does the frequent mention of being a woman in science become an irritation? "A fellow female vice president and I were often asked to have panel discussions of what it's like to be a female scientist, and we just dreaded them!" she says. "It just seemed silly and contrived. But my feelings about it have evolved over the past several years, and I'm now more willing to have people point out that it's unusual to be a female senior executive in R&D." This willingness to be more visible comes from women telling her that they lacked female role models to aspire to. "I realized that 15–20 years ago when I was starting out, there was no one for me to look up to." Instead she took inspiration from her parents: her father, a pharmacist, encouraged her interest in science and medicine, and she credits her mother, a former English teacher, with teaching her about leadership and the importance of good communication.

Desmond-Hellmann says the only low point of her career was the 'heartbreaking' decision to leave private practice. "But I promised my patients I would try my hardest to do my best for many, many cancer patients instead." She has certainly kept that promise, but she's not done yet. "The sense that we have to do better hasn't changed," she says, "because we have to improve things for cancer sufferers."