

Career Story: Finding your niche

This career story features a biomedical scientist who works primarily in immunotherapy and pre-term birth as a result of inflammation. She has a background in health and is passionate about teaching and advocating for women's health. Her career story is a great resource for understanding the importance of being open to experiences and finding the 'career niche' that combines all your interests.

"I love health and medicine. I love it for what they give back to the community."



Demelza's Story

Dr Demelza Ireland is a Perth-based, acclaimed and respected biomedical scientist who works in immunotherapy and women's health. She has always had a passion for science and was a keen volunteer for World Vision and Amnesty when she was at school. These volunteer placements shaped how she perceived her future career and she found she wanted to make real change in the lives of communities through education and medical services.

Ireland's research is focused on preventing pre-term birth due to inflammation of the placenta and she has a particular interest in tumour immunotherapy. She remains passionate about teaching and giving back to the community; with her students, she runs birthing-kit sessions for the public. Initially studying pathology and immunotherapy to go into medicine, Ireland switched to research after her honours year. Since becoming a biomedical scientist in 2006, she has published multiple research articles.

Finding your niche

"Find that other side to your interests. The science is one stream, but to be really successful you need that second passion - policy development, politics, education, science communication, statistics etc. For some, it's being a clinician and a scientist; for others, a researcher and journalist ... combining the two to find your niche will be what makes you recognised as successful."

Ireland experienced first-hand the number of students graduating from her field and the fierce competition for work that followed. She worked hard with charities and in research labs to bolster her résumé and discovered that her love of teaching was the perfect complement to her degree. By combining research and teaching, she was able to advocate for women's health, contribute to research focussed on preventing pre-term birth, and teach students at university. She has since combined all her interests to carve a niche in the competitive work environment. As a result of her strategic career design, Ireland's work is personally meaningful, relevant to her interests and aligned with her strengths.

Following your interests

Ireland has always loved science and she knew when still a student that it was going to a large part of her future career. However, an academic career was not what she initially imagined. As a university student, she majored in microbiology and pathology with the aim of getting into medicine. When that didn't work out, she stayed for an honours year and it was during this time that she developed a love of research. She went on to work in a lab for a few years, but found she wanted to make a more immediate impact in the community.

"I think when you're a young person and you like science and health, there are obvious paths - physio, nurse, doctor - but I don't think you really know what a research scientist does when you're young."

I thought research was really valuable. I really liked the discovery, but I liked more what research gave back to the community. I think that's what drove my career change - I wanted to make a more immediate impact in the community, which is why I left the bench."

Ireland emphasises the need to be invested and interested in the discipline you intend to go in

to: "if you're not driven by the end result of what it's giving back, then getting up in the middle of the night to collect that sample, or set up that PCR (polymerase chain reaction), or wait several hours to finish, you will lose your love of the lab very quickly."

Key message: get into industry and explore what's out there!

The key message to take from this career story is to explore your interests; don't be afraid to get into industry and put your knowledge and capabilities into practice. Although your degree is a fantastic starting point, it is extremely important to hone your practical skills and form professional networks early on.

Ireland encourages all students to look in their local area and see where they can immerse themselves in their discipline and build up confidence. Speaking from the perspective of biomedical science, she says:

"Find a laboratory that researches what you absolutely love. That kind of engagement with the sector is incredibly important for your early career - as you move in your mentor's wake, you pick up their skills, their respect and their publications. You want opportunities to get you to conferences."

Make it count!

The importance of being true to your personal values and interests shines through in this story. There is little point in studying a discipline that doesn't give you joy, so stay true to your passion and your interests and don't be afraid to try new things.

Think about your interests across disciplines, whether that be politics and public health, public speaking and zoology, or graphic design and engineering. One of the ways to think about what interests you is to think about career in terms of time, money, vision and identity. If you're interested in exploring this, try our resource called '[What's your career vision](#)'. Remember to also use the [STEM careers toolkit](#) as you start to imagine your niche.

Learning from biographies and career stories

What do you see when you meet a professional?

Most of the time, we see only the role someone holds now. It is likely, however, that the person has experienced a career with lots of twists and turns.

Get the most out of reading career stories or biographies by asking yourself some of the questions to the right.

1. What do you expect you will have to learn during your career?
2. What might you need to do in order to keep learning?
3. What differences, common issues, and links can you make to your own career journey?
4. Identify and reflect on key decision points in your personal and professional development, and then consider:
 - a. Who played a significant role at these times?
 - b. To whom did you go to for advice?
 - c. What can you put in place for the next time you face a major decision?
5. Biographical accounts raise a number of challenges and opportunities. These include innovative collaborations, work within other sectors, diverse locations, and different modes of work. Look for examples of these in your discipline and reflect on what might be of interest to you:
 - a. What interests you, and what can you do to make this a reality?
 - b. What challenges do you foresee, and how will you prepare for these?
6. Biographical accounts often tell us something about the interests, passions, and motivations of the people involved. Can you think of ways to combine your interests and your future work?
7. What would you like to achieve as a professional?

This resource was developed by Emily Bennett, biomedical sciences student at the University of Western Australia