

From fellowship to leadership

The Lady Estelle Wolfson Emerging Leaders Fellowship: where women can thrive, lead, inspire, and be unashamedly aspirational.



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As a clinical academic, and a dentist by trade, I was delighted to be successful in my application to the Lady Estelle Wolfson Emerging Leaders Fellowship (LEWELF) cohort for 2018–2019. Particularly as I was in Australia on the wrong side of midnight at the time of my telephone interview.

Following graduation with a BDS from the University of Liverpool in 2004, I entered a lengthy, yet empowering, training pathway in paediatric dentistry: through NHS pre-specialist posts, a clinical fellow secondment in Sydney, and an academic post-specialist pathway – juggling the demands of consultant training, delivering higher education, a PhD, and gaining leadership and coaching skills en route. Paediatric dentists commission, deliver and supervise the provision of dental care for children with complex oral health problems. We advocate, notably through our specialist society, the British Society

of Paediatric Dentistry (BSPD), for the improved oral health of all children across the UK, many of whom suffer the consequences of preventable dental disease and of dental trauma. I commenced my role as a senior lecturer and honorary consultant in paediatric dentistry at the University of Liverpool in 2017. This pathway was worth the balance and effort it demanded, and I was looking for the next step.

As an applicant, one of the most appealing features of the year-long Emerging Leaders Fellowship Programme is the ability of each fellow to tailor the events that they attend, and the committees they become involved with, to their individual interests, enabling them to identify and steer a leadership career in the right, personalised direction.

Induction to the programme took place in September 2018. It included a virtual walk-through of The Royal College of Surgeons of England (RCS England) and its committees, with the aim of allowing fellows to fully

appreciate the scope of the work done by the College and also the opportunities on offer for our involvement. I was assigned a mentor, the Dean of the Faculty of Dental Surgery (FDS), who was kindly on hand to offer guidance and support throughout the year to help me get the most out of the fellowship. We commenced a formalised leadership training with workshops on that very first day – and followed it up with a drink to get to know one another afterwards.

Fellows are asked to identify RCS England committees that they most wish to become involved with and to observe. From the plethora of choice, I opted to attend, in no particular order, Research and Quality, Membership Development, Global Affairs, Learning and Assessment, and RCS England Council. Additionally, as a dentist, I managed to get a spot observing the FDS Board.

The fellowship truly is a great example of an experience in which you get out of it

what you put into it. As well as attending the above meetings and gaining insight into how committees are run at College level, I joined in various opportunities that arose throughout the year. Favourites included working with the head of marketing on the branding of FDS, attending the Women in Surgery Press for Success conference hosted at the Royal Institute of British Architects, meeting Professor Averil Mansfield CBE, participating in RCS England's Impact Review, and continuing work with the Membership and Engagement Committee. There was support throughout the year from both the College and peer fellows – we still keep in touch. Advice and guidance were available at every step of the way.

In line with the call for action to address diversity and inclusivity across healthcare, our professions are tasked with striving for gender balance in the workforce. Women in Surgery (WinS) is a national initiative working to promote surgery as a career for women and to enable women who have chosen a career in surgery to realise their professional goals. For those who have not yet seen the Twitter account, I highly recommend following @WomenSurgeonsUK. Lady Estelle Wolfson fellows were encouraged to join and spread the word about WinS to motivate, enable and inspire colleagues to fulfil their surgical career ambitions. Across healthcare, there is an urgent call to action to address systematic gender bias impeding equity for women and to create institutional change to address gender bias impeding the advancement of, and equity for, women within the fields of science, medicine and global health. In 1991, just 3% of all consultant surgeons were female. In 2020, this is still just 13.2%. Only 24% of trust medical directors are female, and only 37% of all senior roles are held by women. A number of barriers to women progressing to leadership roles have been identified, including personal expectations, organisational cultures, and work-life balance, which may have a cumulative effect on progression. The Emerging Leaders Fellowship was born out of the

recognition that females may experience imposter syndrome, fear of the unknown and have responsibilities that may discourage them from applying to leadership roles. Together, WinS and LEWELF offer a step in the right direction towards a year in which women are not underrepresented in leadership roles.

Networking opportunities for fellows are plentiful. Since completing the LEWELF, I have worked with the FDS's head of education to deliver teaching on numerous courses and to develop others. I would like to tell the story about how this opportunity arose. I was sitting with my laptop at the College one lunchtime between observing committee meetings when the head of education was passing and noticed that I was working on some presentation slides. We chatted and she invited me on board the FDS Management and Leadership course as a trial to see how the first programme was delivered – everything fell into place. The welcome I received that day was typical of those I was presented with throughout the year. I was privileged to present at the following year's Women in Surgery Lift As You Climb conference – and made a few Twitter friends on the day (possibly largely as a result of my presentation advice to 'draft emails with wine and send them with coffee'). The amazing attendees of the day have been generous in their invitations to present at similar local conferences around the UK since then. Finally, I have joined the Women in Surgery Mentoring Scheme and can't wait to get in touch with the aspiring students who have signed up for this year's speed-mentoring sessions!

I owe a great thanks to the teams at RCS England and the FDS. It was a privilege to be a part of the Emerging Leaders cohort and I continue to put the year's lessons learnt towards advocating for the issues that I am most passionate about. In the day job, I have been promoted to programme director of the undergraduate dentistry course – a position I wouldn't have dreamed of applying for yet without the boost the fellowship provided. It's a career fast-track move!

During our year observing RCS England committees, fellows saw in action that followers talk about problems while leaders talk about solutions, that Michelle Obama was right when she said 'when they go low, we go high', and that diplomacy, gentle challenge, ownership and generosity are key to effective leadership. Look around you and consider the attributes of those you think of leaders. Look at yourself and ask what you can do better and for others. Through the fellowship, I have learnt that leadership is an action, not a position. I would encourage those in a similar position to grab the opportunity to apply for this fellowship when recruitment next comes around. You must be willing to do the things that others won't, to have the things that others don't.

At a time in which we have all redefined 'unprecedented pressures', with exceptional numbers of colleagues and the future workforce seeking to leave the UK, and when strong direction is required, the Emerging Leaders Fellowship offers a golden opportunity to inspire, to thrive, and to be unashamedly aspirational.

Due to current circumstances, the fellowship is postponed. We will email fellows and members when applications re-open. Follow us on social media to keep up-to-date on news at the College.