

'No Need to Shout' episode 2 transcript – Melanie Ferguson and Caitlin Barr

Melanie Ferguson

You know, I think that's what I love about what I do. The fact that some of the work that we do will impact on people's lives, and will benefit people's lives and will benefit the profession. You know, and I guess that's the driver really, at the end of the day.

Caitlin Barr

Hello, and welcome to No need to shout powered by women in hearing health. I'm Caitlin. I am one of the hosts here today and it is my absolute pleasure to welcome my first podcast guest, Dr. Melanie Ferguson. Mel is currently the head of Brain and Hearing and an associate professor in brain and hearing at Curtin University. She's based in Perth, Sunny Perth, on the west coast of Australia. But as you will soon realize she is born and bred in the UK. And what an honour it is to have her here in Australia. Mel, welcome.

Melanie Ferguson

Yeah, thanks, Caitlin. It's a real pleasure to be here talking to you.

Caitlin Barr

My pleasure, and appreciate your time. So why don't we kick off by you giving us a snapshot?

Melanie Ferguson

Yeah. So like, I wasn't really thinking about me, as a person. I was kind of thinking how the last sort of 30 odd years have panned out. And I was thinking about where I am right here, right now. And as you said in the intro, Caitlin, I moved to Australia three years ago, in fact about three years ago next week, I realized. Three years ago, from the UK where I'd lived all my life, you know, spent the last 20 odd years in Nottingham. I think one does a lot in one's life. There's so many different sort of facets to it. And how did I end up here? And in a good way? And how did that happen? The last three years have really been full of highs. I've had some amazing experiences over here in Australia, I've had some pretty serious lows, some really dark moments, as obviously, everybody will realize that two of those three years there was a global pandemic, which kind of really got in the way of my plans for coming out here. And I have, of course, I'm going to talk to my children within the first couple of minutes. I've got two beautiful children, Alex and Molly, who are going to be seeing next year, next week for the first time in two years. So it's, I feel very emotional about it. Yeah, for very much better. Can't wait. And the plan was when we came out that they were going to come out we're going to have lots of fantastic experiences. So of course, we can do that with them. They did come out actually fortunately, just before the pandemic, which was great. And so, you know, for these amazing experiences, Australia is a beautiful country and moving to the other side of the world at my time of life, you know, there's a lot to, to learn, there was so many different things to sort of pick up. And

then the pandemic did actually trash quite a bit of that. And we're coming through it after two years, it's going to be fantastic next weekend. In fact, I can't really see much beyond next weekend, when I meet them at the airport it's going to be fantastic.

Caitlin Barr

That will be amazing. So Mel, does that mean you haven't seen them for those two years?

Melanie Ferguson

No, not at all. So last time i saw them was January 2019. They've been over for four weeks or six weeks. And of course, when we said goodbye at the airport, we were like, Yeah, see, see in a few months' time, because we were going to go back and of course, all that changed. And we are obviously in touch regularly, like on a daily basis. Nearly. But yeah, it's been really hard. And, you know, you can probably hear it in my voice. It's been terrible, but, I'm no different to millions of people around the world. And many people have been apart from their loved ones. And we see it in Australia. You know, the boarder has been shut. And now the boarder is finally opening in Australia yesterday and in Western Australia in a couple of weeks' time and you can see what it means to people to be reunited. Can't wait.

Caitlin Barr

So great to hear it. So I mean, tell me more about what it's been like for you as a mother then. You know, you're juggling this big job, that's a new job, and also being on the other side of the world from your children, your adult children. Tell me more about that.

Melanie Ferguson

Yes, so I had two jobs. I came over here to literally to work at Niall and then last June I moved over to the Ear Science Institute in Perth. And so it's been a bit a lot of change. And with that always brings challenges in terms of not seeing the children I mean, it has been quite heartbreaking actually. When the pandemic started, it was pretty awful because people were dying by the hundreds in the UK, and we didn't know about what it was what was going on. And so I was really frightened when it started, really frightened. And, we didn't expect it, who would have expected a global pandemic. And I think what's happened is, I would say the first six months were horrendous, and we were going to come back. I couldn't live. I was finding it really difficult to live in a country whose borders were shut, I couldn't leave. I could leave, but I couldn't get back in. And it's funny, really, because you know, there were so many different things in your life that you weigh up. You weigh up your desperate desire to see your children. I mean, I've got friends who are loving, family, other family, and then you're weighing up your career. I'd moved to the other side of the world for, what I see was going to be an amazing job. And then you've got your economic situation. You can't just say, Right, I'm off, and then suddenly, both incomes go. And then the UK was a terrible place to live. Everybody was saying you're so much better in Australia. In Australia, we're living a normal life. So there were so many different things to balance. I was seriously thinking of coming home. And you know, the draw was too great. Even with all that, all that going on, and then you start becoming accustomed to it. And then the

Perth job came up, the Ear Science job at Curtin University. And it came out the same, I got the advert same week that the vaccines were being rolled out in the UK, so I thought it's all going to be over soon, why don't I just do something different? So then I've had to adjust with, right, so we're staying in Australia, and it's a big topic of conversation between myself and my husband, about, what we're doing, and why we're doing it. And yeah, so you kind of become normalized to it. And you have coping strategies, we are always on our phones, you know, with our WhatsApp group is active daily. We've got the Zoom, so, we zoom regularly. And when my son graduated, when Alex graduated in a few months ago, in November, we could zoom into the ceremony, and we were with them for pre drinks that they had beforehand. And so we've got technology now, which means that we're not sort of a million miles away with no sight, no sound, otherwise, that would have been unbearable. So yeah, it's been a real challenge. And then at the same time, I've met some wonderful people. So I've met some truly wonderful people. And we've had these amazing experiences in this beautiful country. And then the jobs, you know, two quite challenging jobs. And, yeah, I haven't had much time to be bored.

Caitlin Barr

No, that's good. Yeah, I have to say, I see your beautiful pictures of the various activities and adventuring you get up to and I'm a bit jealous.

Melanie Ferguson

Oh, so we made a decision, six months into the pandemic, we were like, Okay, we're going to go crazy. And we were like, every weekend, we'll go to different places. We did a tour around New South Wales, we did this wonderful road trip. Go from Sydney to Perth when we came over here. One of the most amazing experiences my life. So yeah, it's been swings and roundabouts. Really. And yeah. And next weekend, I'm going to see my kids, and I just can't wait.

Caitlin Barr

I'm so pleased for you Mel. That's fantastic. So I wonder if you could cast us back a little bit, because we'll come back to the kind of current years' time but I'm really interested to hear about your journey, I guess to this point. And you wrote recently, an article about leadership in hearing care in audiology. And obviously, that's been a big part of your life, leadership and what that looks like. So I'd be really interested if you could take us through your journey.

Melanie Ferguson

Yeah, that's right. So I will actually post the article. I wrote it actually in 2019. It was for a special issue in ENT in audiology news on leaders, women leaders in ENT and audiology. And yeah, that was interesting because again, that kind of forces you to reflect on what you think you've given to the profession and what your career is about. And your talk about leadership, and it's a funny one, I would say, when I sort of think back to my career right to the very, very beginning, you know, I would say, I've only been a leader for 10-15 years or something, but actually, that's not true. You can go right back to the very beginning and even in my early couple of years, you know, I was really involved

in the profession of Audiology. So for people who don't know, I work in research, and I've always worked in research, but I have a very, very strong foothold in clinical audiology. And I've been very involved in professional affairs in the UK, really the British society of audiology, the British Academy of Audiology. And in fact, actually, when I was baby junior audiologist, the organization was the British Academy of audiological scientists because that's what we called then. And in the first couple of years, I ended up getting involved in the running of what Australians called the CCC, we call it the certificate of audiological competence. It was a training scheme for people who'd finished their masters to give them their clinical experience. And after I got it, within a year of doing my MSc and then I took over, I was involved in the committee and then I took over as the coordinator. So even at an early stage, I guess there was some, some leadership coming through, I probably wouldn't have recognized it as that maybe. But I found myself sitting around the table with the leaders of UK audiology at the time.

Caitlin Barr

Some people who you perceived as leaders.

Melanie Ferguson

Yeah, who I see, yeah, I perceived as leaders who were probably way younger than I am now. And who I became really good friends with. And I was really lucky to be able to sit at those tables and learn from them and do my own thing as the CAC coordinator. And then actually, I stopped that role, which I really enjoyed because I had my first child, Alex, and then I kind of stood back a bit, you know, probably, we know the many women in audiology have children. And I think it's really difficult to manage a career and a family, and I found it extremely challenging at times. But it absolutely was the right thing for me to do, both and I have a wonderfully supportive husband, which helps, but it was hard work. And I kind of stepped back a bit from professional audiology affairs, probably for about 10 years, and then started picking it up again. And I've had a number of leadership roles within audiology in the UK. Met some, just some fantastic people. I mean, I love it. That side of my career alongside the research side is something that's given me a massive amount of pleasure. Well, it's been wonderful people. And we've done things. I look at Helen Martin, Jen Wild, John Day, Kevin Monroe, you know, sort of the people, the people in the UK who are doing things and working with people, and they're people of my age, not the people who are perceived to be the leaders. You know, when I was in my early 20s. And we've done things, we've developed high training schemes, we've sort of pushed the field of adult rehabilitation when I led the special interest group for the BSA. My involvement in the nice guideline development in the UK was a huge thing is probably one of my biggest, one of my achievements, my biggest highlights really. Yeah. And when I when I left the UK to come to Australia, you know, I was due to become the chair of the British Society of Audiology, which I feel really sad that I didn't do because the BSA is such a wonderful organization. And it would have been marvellous to have that level of leadership role. But yeah, so I've been involved a lot in the profession. And, you do these things, like out of time, don't you get days off, I was given time for work, but you do a lot of stuff in your own time. And I just think it's why I love what I've done over the last 30 odd years and why I love audiology so much.

Caitlin Barr

Yeah, right. It really sounds like it's really enriched your professional experience and bridged, you know, there's your job, which sounds like you love anyway, but then there's all these opportunities that enrich everything.

Melanie Ferguson

Yeah, you know, the research side of things, which is my job is kind of what I do, is massively integrally linked with the audiology profession. So, I think, yeah, that's what I love about what I do. The fact that not everything, obviously, but some of the work that we do will impact on people's lives and will benefit people's lives and will benefit the profession. And I guess that's the driver really, at the end of the day. And that's why, you know, going talking about motherhood, going to the very beginning, you know, when I'm stuck there with a two year old, a two year old daughter on my lap, and the laptop doing whatever, or the children are talking to me, and I'm engrossed in what I'm doing. And they're like, Mum, Mum, I'm like oh yeah I'm not paying attention. You're kind of juggling all of that, and you do your best, and it's messy. But I think, you know, looking back, I think that's alright, I wouldn't have done it any other way really.

Melanie Ferguson

Many women in your fabulous group that you've set up your Women in Hearing Health, you know, the family's really important. What really struck me when you set the group up, I thought, this is fantastic when I saw what you and Kat had done. And, I was reading what people were putting on there, sort of personal This is me, you know, hi, I'm Mel from Perth, and nearly everybody, like, everybody was talking about their families, because at the end of the day, your family is the most important thing, children are the most important thing, which is why the last two years have been so horrendous, because, the most important thing in my life were half a world away, and I couldn't see them, I was like what was I doing here? But I would say, they're not the only thing in my life. Yeah, most important thing, but they're not the only thing. And I think, from my point of view, I owe it to myself to do other things I really enjoy. And I really enjoyed my work most, sometimes I didn't. I think I remember a couple years, I was like, you know what, I think might leave audiology. But mostly, I've been pretty happy at work I enjoy this, it stimulates me, love it. So you know, trying to get that balance is difficult, but well worth the effort, I would say, well worth the effort.

Caitlin Barr

And Mel do you remember early on, having anyone in your world, because I know you wrote, and I love this this line, 'you can't be what you can't see', when you were talking about leadership. Was there anyone early on that made you think like I'm going to put in this effort and it's going to be worth it kind of prospectively? Or did you just jump in and go with it? What was your experience?

Melanie Ferguson

Well, in the early days, you just, actually, I didn't really think about where I was going. And I've had a few conversations with some younger audiologists or researchers. And I sort of say, you know, think about what you want, think about where you might go, because I just kind of pulled along, there was

no great plan. And there was no great plan, I thought I enjoyed what I was doing, you know, kids came along, you know, I was happy, mostly happy. And I didn't have a plan. And I worked with some leaders in the field, you know, I worked quite closely, in Nottingham was a big audiology centre. So there were some women who are 7-10 years older than me, who, I could see what they were doing, I could see they had these leadership roles. There were loads of men obviously, because men were much more in a leadership role, particularly in those days, years 30 odd years ago. But I do remember actually saying, and after thinking about this, about 10 years in somebody, I've had my first performance review, and somebody said to me what you want to do with your career, and I remember saying, I'd like your job, like 5-10 years' time. And this person said, you might want to lower your expectations Mel. And I was like, what? And I was like, alright, and actually, the next couple years were probably the least good years of my career. And then things started taking off again. And so what I say to younger people is think about what you want think about where you want to be people are frightened about thinking about being in leadership roles, you know, and you don't have the confidence I mean, I did not have the confidence then to turn around and say, you know what, forget it. You know, I'm going to go off and I'm going to be whatever. I didn't other people might have but I didn't have the confidence to. Confidence was a big issue with me and kind of held me back. And if I could go back now and say to myself at that particular point remember where I was sat remember the room I was in I'd say you know forget what what's been said. You have the capability, have the confidence, go for it, and see how far you can get. Just go. I read finished I looked at the article before I came on and my final line was Go for it. And it was like go for it. But I would say probably the next 15 years, I was like, oh my goodness, what am I doing? Where am I going, and I'm not good enough and all this, this sort of thing. And it really wasn't until maybe the last 10 years. And I had a couple of things that happened. And I thought, yeah, that's actually I think I might be doing right now. So that's me. That's my story. And I think I'm pretty happy where I've got to, and I'm much more confident now. You know, moved to the other side of the world for a job. But yeah, I think, you sent me an email, you talked about exceeding expectations. I'm like, yeah, what were my expectations? My expectations, were probably to earn a reasonable salary and enjoy what I was doing while I was bring up my kids. That was probably where I sat for many years. But doing things, you know, doing things for the profession, but you don't see it when you're in it. That's why I was reflecting on this this morning, and I thought, wow, I should reflect a little bit more and think what was good and recognize, you'll always have challenges and things that happen. Like, rethink your expectations. And you just push through, if you can, but not always.

Caitlin Barr

I mean, it sounds like you now take an active role in trying to support women in particular, or people in in that circumstance that early on circumstances. Because you talk about, you know, actively seeking and taking opportunities. So that's wonderful to hear.

Melanie Ferguson

Yeah, I think it's really important. I think, as you get older, I have a sort of sense of duty. I'd like to think that there were quite a few people, and it is mainly women, and I'm a big fan of women in careers and women generally, because I think women are great, and you know, we can do fabulous things. So I think there probably some people out there who think oh, yeah, I think Mel really helped me in x, y z. For example, this week I've had two publications, and both of them were trainees. So

one was a trainee doctor, and the other one was a trainee clinical scientist. And, you know, I just think that's fabulous. You know, that's what gives me pleasure, both these trainees have got publications, and one was in AJ and AJ, which has got an enormous impact factor. So, I just think that's really good, you know, working with younger people.

Caitlin Barr

It's interesting, because I think there's a subset of women who have battled to be where they are, but kind of look around and think, Well, others should have to battle to you know, that's not fair if I had to.

Melanie Ferguson

I think everybody needs a helping hand. And I would say, certainly, in my early, my very early days, I definitely had helping hands. And then, in that article, you mentioned, I had a particular hand that was very helpful, which was my friend, and my boss, my mentor, Dave Moore. And, you know, he really, I think, has pushed me. If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be here. And he said, Mel, you need to do a PhD, and I'm like, do I, really, and I just kind of didn't get it? And he said, yeah, you do. And there were loads of things. We were running this big study, and he said, right, off you go, and I'm like, Whoa, I'm terrified. And he goes, No, off you go, you'll be good. And he gave me my wings, and, you know, I'm really grateful for him for that. And, so I sort of look and I think, if I can help other people – good! And that's what I try to do. And not always successfully, I'm sure, but I do try hard to promote other people who, you know, I think a good. We all need a helping hand.

Caitlin Barr

It's really interesting from a leadership perspective, because my sort of take on leadership, is that it's not the position or the title that you have, it's actually behaviours. And you can show leadership, no matter where you are, what you're doing. And to me that idea of, you know, the rising tide lifts everyone. That's leadership. And sometimes you don't recognize it.

Melanie Ferguson

Yeah. And sometimes I don't think you recognize it. I mean, coming to Australia's been great, but, you know, there's been a lot to learn. And I look back and I sort of see this golden period when I was in Nottingham from about 2014 to when I left in 2019. And we started getting momentum on with the team and the team was developing and there was some really fantastic researchers came out of the group, Helen Henshaw, David Maidment, and Eithne Heffernan who worked really closely together. And we're still publishing. Both papers had Helena Ratner on them. And we I didn't realize it was happening. And I remember somebody said to me, How come your group seems to work so well together? And I didn't really know. And we just kind of worked well. Let me tell you that it wasn't smooth all the time. It wasn't a smooth all the time. And you started then looking around and you realize, actually, I think we're doing some really good stuff and we're working really well together. I remember one day, there was a group of us, and we could see how all the projects were fitting in together. And everybody was helping everybody. I remember I sat and I just said, this is

fantastic. And this is where I'm at Perth right now. I'm at the very same place of Perth and it just feels fantastic when everything. There's always little things getting in the way, but you feel everybody's moving together. And that was my golden period, I reckon. And I you know, I have high hopes for my time in Perth too

Caitlin Barr

Yes, yes, absolutely. And so it sounds like your role at the moment is obviously research based, but you're spanning at an institute, a Medical Research Institute and the university. So how's that?

Melanie Ferguson

How's that work? Yeah, it's good. Well I'm employed by the university, and the post was strategic post, based on a joint venture with Curtin Ear Science and Oticon. So my role really was to sort of build a bridge between Curtin and Ear Science and to sort of develop the research. There's been research coming out of Ear Science for many, many years. And there was another appointment made at the same time in the basic science area. So I'm, I work in the translational clinical area, the head of brain and hearing, and it's really sort of to push the research of the institute, but do it collaboratively with everything that a university can offer. So for example, on Friday, I've arranged a workshop with some of my Ear Science colleagues, a whole bunch of engineers from Curtin, and some people from Oticon, to see how we can collaborate to develop new innovations for hearing healthcare. So, you know, we've got fantastic opportunities here. And, you know, I've worked quite hard over the last six months sort of getting to know people at the university and sort of looking at how we might develop collaborations, and as many people who do research in Australia will know, there was the big NHMRC target to call for research. So that was a great opportunity to bring people together from Curtin Ear Science and from other institutes across Australia.

Caitlin Barr

That's wonderful. It sounds like that the thread of collaboration is something you've talked about across different points of your career, either as part of your role, or the kind of involvement in the profession more broadly. And it makes me wonder about, you know, what it is about you? Or is it something about being a woman? Like, tell me more about this idea of collaboration, and how much value it's been for you across your career?

Melanie Ferguson

Yeah, I think it's, I mean, it's key to pretty much everything we do, collaborating. I mean, it's not even key in the workplace. I mean, it's key to your family life. You know, Guy, my husband, and I, we collaborate massively on so many different things. He's come to the other side of the world with me. Collaboration is so important. And again, it's not always easy, because you've got so many, I mean, collaboration in the workplace, I think, can be really difficult. But, both jobs in Australia, you know, I was really clear that, if everybody works together, we will definitely get more than what is it, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, we will definitely get more than that, we definitely more than some of the parts, because we can all help each other. I'm a big believer in openness and

transparency. So everybody can see what we're doing. If somebody's got a skill here, they can share it with this person here. And, you know, and then support, supporting people. Research is a pretty, it's a very competitive field. And, I've seen people be trampled on, I think we have to try and work together to get the best for what we want to achieve. And without that, it won't work. So you know, in both jobs satisfying, quite a bit of time, of course, I was new, finding out how people work, which I think is quite challenging at times, but great in others, and trying to bring people together. Where we're at in Perth right now, it feels fantastic. I've had the best month since I've been here with just some fantastic conversations with some of my colleagues. And you know, I'm really excited about the future.

Caitlin Barr

Yeah, that's wonderful. I'm excited to hear what comes out of it, too. So that's all very positive Mel, but I want to pick up on a point you made earlier, which was that there was a period in your life where you thought you wanted to leave audiology.

Melanie Ferguson

It's funny because I haven't thought about it for years, and I was just kind of going through, but that comment stuck with me. And it kind of comes up perennially with Guy and I over a beer. It was probably only a couple of years, and I just felt a bit lost, and I didn't have a direction didn't know where I was going. The children would have been young, you know, one and three, which I think is a really difficult place for women, when you've got really small children that really can't do much, you've got to do everything. You and your family have to do everything for them. So, I seriously looked elsewhere, and I was thinking, well, maybe I'll move into psychology, I did a course, you know, I did a course, like a conversion course, to get me into psychology. But then something happened. There was the Modernizing Hearing Services Program, which started around about 1999 in the UK, and it was massive, and I got involved in that. I was really quite involved in it. And I kind of just found my feet again. And I found my purpose and my confidence and felt worthy. And that took a while. And then I guess from there, I was, actually, there was another time just a few years later, and I was like, I'm going leave where I am. I need to look somewhere else. But anyway, things happen. And yeah, but it was for a very short period. It was for a couple of years. Because I'm very optimistic person, and I'm quite positive about how things have panned out. But there were times when things have been really difficult. And it's not all plain sailing. And my time in Australia has not been plain sailing. You know, there's been other things which have been really good. You look for the balance.

Caitlin Barr

But I actually think it's really powerful Mel, to hear, to hear that because you know, at any given time in your career, you can get stuck and think, oh, I'm, I must be the only person who doesn't have a sense of direction or, you know, isn't enjoying things all the time. But to be reassured that sometimes you stick it out or, or recognize opportunities, or not. Right?

Melanie Ferguson

Yeah. I mean, actually when I came to Australia, you know, it wasn't just, oh, like there's a job over in Sydney, I'll go for it. You know, I'd be thinking about this for six months and I've been looking at other places. I think when the Sydney job came up, I was ready to go. I'd been in Nottingham for many, many years, and once I'd started looking, I was like, I need to do something different now. I do stick with things, but you have to know when to move on.

Caitlin Barr

I mean, it seems to me, I mentioned collaboration before, but it sounds like, you've actually made some quite brave or quite courageous decisions, across your career, but I was really surprised to hear you say the word worthy before Mel. So if I can, I'd like to dig into that a bit more, because worthiness is such an internally experienced emotion. So what's been your experience with that?

Melanie Ferguson

I mean, there are definite times, lots of times, maybe worthy is a bit strong, but I'm not good enough. Definitely, I'm not good enough, that whole imposter syndrome thing. I'm not good enough. And there were a couple of points in my life probably about, well, I won't go to the details, but you know, when I started in around about 2010 when I started a new position in Nottingham and I was like, oh God, you know, this is, I felt very exposed. I was leading this research group and I felt very exposed. I'm like, what am I doing? Sometimes you lack confidence. I think I lack confidence at times, but I'm actually quite determined, so I kind of pushed through it. But there have been times when I've thought, maybe somebody tells you to re-examine your expectations, you think, oh yeah, maybe I'm not as good as a thought I was. I think everybody has that. And I do. I probably do now. I definitely do.

Caitlin Barr

And do you think, I mean, I certainly think, I know I experienced that feeling too, but do, is that unique, is it unique to women, do you think, or is it everybody? What's been your observation?

Melanie Ferguson

I hate to say this. I think women are more likely to think that than men. I've started reading quite a bit on research with those gender differences. When you read these articles, they're never good reading. I do think that women take the brunt of childcare, in most cases, and children, even if you've got a wonderful husband, at the end of the day, you're the one having the babies and feeding them. And, you know, I was the one that went part-time and all that kind of thing. It was part-time for a good eight years. And it's conditioning. I mean, I'm quite a bit older than you. So, you know, my conditioning will have been different to yours. Maybe certainly I'm different than my mom. But, you know, I just think we work through it. I think men do have confidence crisis and what have you, but I think they're much more likely to brazen it out. I think there probably are differences and I hope people don't mind me saying that. I mean, my mum had to leave her job when she had me and that wasn't uncommon. In my mum's generation, they used to leave work when they got married. My mum broke the mold for working for three years. And so things have moved on and I think it's

absolutely wonderful to see women leaders in the workplace. I mean, I've got two fantastic line managers, one at Curtin, one Ear Science. And, I love that, really, women who inspire me and who admire. I love it. Talking to you, talking to Kat, talking to Bec, Donna, my UK colleagues, women who a lot of them have children, pushing through and working through. I think women generally are courageous and brave and work really hard to get where they are and all the evidence shows women work harder in the workplace to get where they are than men. And I think we're fantastic for it.

Caitlin Barr

I agree. So what do you think is the next challenge or barrier for women to break or the next opportunity for us to sort of reach our potential?

Melanie Ferguson

Yeah, that's an interesting one. Particularly as I'm probably coming towards the end of my career. We are seeing many more women leaders. I mean, audiology is very female heavy. There's many more women, 80% of audiology are women. But you know, I look at the board of audiology Australia, and I look at the board of the British Academy of Audiology and it's all women and that hasn't always been the case. And so I just think we're going to see a continuation of women being empowered to take on these roles, to take on leadership roles and to bring on other people, men and women, but particularly women. I do think women need a helping hand. I think there's a long way to go, but I just think, we just need to, as women keep pushing, when you hear terrible things, things are said, and you think actually we live in 2022, not 1982. Call it out. Be brave, be brave. Call it out. Call out poor, poor behaviours around gender.

Caitlin Barr

Yeah, absolutely. You know, it's interesting. And I agree. It's wonderful to see so many inspiring women in those examples, the boards are fantastic, but, I still observe that there are pretty large pockets in hearing health where it's, men are the standouts, the standout leadership positions and are sort of, you know, looked up to. And I wonder what that's about. Why is that the case? And what's next there?

Melanie Ferguson

I hate to say it, but I think men's voices often carry more weight than women's and again, I think that's probably conditioning. You've got a choice haven't you? You've got a choice to speak out, challenge it, or just sit there and not. I have spoken out on quite a few occasions and sometimes that's got me into trouble to be honest. But, I think I'd rather speak out and stand up for myself and stand up for myself as a woman than be trodden on. So, you know, I think we have a personal responsibility to ourselves and I think we've got a responsibility to women in the field as well. I mean, you look at the figures, Australia's really good at showing these figures of how many women go into research and how many early middle career researchers there are. And then you see this massive drop off when it comes to senior positions. And, you know, I think there is work going on, work taking place to try and, certainly in the UK. There's the Athena Swan. I know that there's work going

on in Australia to try and improve that. And we need to support it as much as we can and do what we can.

Caitlin Barr

I agree. And Mel, as we're finishing up, I'm left wondering if you have any thoughts you want to share with people about a research career, because there may well be people listening, who've done their clinical training and are wondering about what on earth their path could be. And sometimes I think research is a bit hidden. Like what actually is that as a career? Is there anything you think you'd like to share?

Melanie Ferguson

Yeah, well actually when I scanned through my article, a few years ago, I think one of the headlines was, there was a mystique around research. And I think we need to get rid of that mystique. I remember this really well. It was 2008 and I was talking about this, the high training scheme. We'd included a research module and I was promoting this and I remember saying quite a few times, you know, there's a mystique and we need to get rid of the mystique about research. And I actually mentioned it in the article. Now come to think it, people are like, oh, you know, researchers are, they're like really brainy or whatever. And I'm like, no, no, they, you know, we've got these great audiologists, who've got great skills. We've got researchers, who've got great skills. You can get crossover. We need to remove the mystique from research because for me, you just need to know what you're doing in the same way as if you're testing a baby, you just need to know what you're doing. And which is why we put in that research module into the high training scheme in 2008, so more people could do research. The trainee I was talking about published her paper this week, did it through that scheme. She's had really good experience of doing a research project and getting it to publication. So, you know, I think we need to take away the mystique. My thing is there's no difference between research and audiologist. It's, it's just a job. You get to know how to do it. It's just like doing a PhD. When I embarked my PhD, even though I'd been working research for years, I was really quite scared. I was like, oh my God. And I would say to people, why are you frightened? It's just a training scheme. It's no different to the clinical scientist training scheme. So we need to take out the mystique. There is nothing special about research. It's just another career option. For which you hopefully get the right training. But if you want to have a career in research, as opposed to doing bit of both, I do think it's really important to have a PhD. And that was my lesson that I learned later on in life. And if I had to, if I had to do my time again, and probably one of my regrets is I should have done my PhD at least 10 years earlier. I okay. And I think I'd be in a different place now.

Caitlin Barr

Oh, how do you think that would be different?

Melanie Ferguson

Because doing the PhD gave me tons of confidence and I realized, although I'd been working in research, it's about having that independence and the training. So I hadn't had the kind of training

you have for PhD, which is about the individual. I think if I had my PhD 10 years earlier, I think where I am now, I'd be five years ago or maybe seven, eight years ago. Maybe if I had a little bit longer. But I'm not complaining. I'm just saying that that's what I would've done, if I could do something differently from a career point of view.

Caitlin Barr

That's interesting. And perhaps the confidence played into.

Melanie Ferguson

Yeah. And you know, when I was younger, PhDs, weren't a thing. You know, only certain types of people did PhDs and they went to the right school or were men, where I was anyway. So I think opportunities for people to do these things are great. And people should take them if they want to.

Caitlin Barr

Yeah or seek them out as you say.

Melanie Ferguson

Yeah or seek them out. Yeah. Seek them out and talk to people who can help.

Caitlin Barr

Yeah. Wonderful. And so the article that we've been referring to is, as you said, Mel from ENT and Audiology News, and it's called Audiology research opportunities: Career progression, and leadership. And Mel's going to post that on the Facebook group, but we'll also link to it on this podcast, it's from a few years ago, but certainly super pertinent, and has been a nice undercurrent for our conversation today. And I feel like there's so many other rabbit holes we could go down in this conversation and I've really, really enjoyed getting to know more about your career and your life Mel, and those critical points that have sent you in the direction where you find yourself today.

Melanie Ferguson

Well, thanks much for the invitation Caitlin. It's been a real pleasure and, we've said we'll have a beer afterwards and I'll fill you in on a few more things and it's been a really lovely experience to dwell on some of those things.

Caitlin Barr

Well, you're very welcome, Mel. I am sure that anyone who listens to this will really enjoy it too. And you might have more people coming asking for a beer for more details thereafter. So you will be busy I think for the next little while.

Melanie Ferguson

Oh, that sounds fun, doesn't it? Oh, I like better fun.

Caitlin Barr

Thanks so much for your time today, Mel.

Melanie Ferguson

Yeah, it's been lovely. Thanks for the invite Caitlin, really enjoyed it.

Caitlin Barr

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