

Andrew Cuddihy

POSTDOCTORAL FELLOW

PhD Experimental Medicine, McGill 1999
BScH Biochemistry, Queen's 1994

In his own words: "Focused, determined, persevering."

To be at the stage where my 'real' career is in its infancy and I can watch things unfold for a while before committing myself in a particular direction is more than I could ask for."

Andrew Cuddihy — a Postdoctoral Fellow at the Peter MacCallum Cancer Institute in Melbourne, Australia — knows that his career is unfolding in extraordinary times. "I'm on the front lines of what will be a very exciting time in medical research with the recent deciphering of the human genome. Science as we know it is going to be revolutionized in the very near future."

Staying the academic course — the cancer research fellowship follows a B.Sc. in Biochemistry from Queen's and a Ph.D. in Experimental Medicine from McGill — has posed its own upheavals, says Andrew, but he believes that pursuing post-graduate work is a viable way of ensuring good career prospects while keeping a finger on the pulse of groundbreaking research.

"Research can be very frustrating and stressful at times. Every so often, for no apparent reason, an experiment doesn't work, period. You need to learn to develop a thick skin and not take things too hard. Just adjusting to life as post-doc after being a Ph.D. student can be challenging. You have to wean yourself

away from your supervisor, become more independent as a scientist and take intellectual ownership of your project."

Big challenges are nothing new to Andrew. At the age of four, while living in Montreal, he lost his hearing after a bout of meningitis. Even though he had profound hearing loss, he was still able to be integrated in regular schools with hearing peers, often being the only deaf person in the class or school.

When he was sixteen, his family moved to Kingston. Despite his disability, he excelled in high school chemistry and biology, which opened the door to a biochemistry degree at the University of Waterloo; he hoped to gain some good work experience through the university's co-op program. After a year he transferred to Queen's so his family could support him during extensive rehabilitation work involved with a cochlear implant ("bionic ear").

At Queen's he lobbied hard for students with disabilities, co-chairing various committees dealing with accessibility and pioneering C-Note, a novel computerized notetaking program for students with hearing impairments. The program is now widely used at a number of universities and is available over the Internet free of charge. "Creating C-Note was a very formative, empowering experience, which grew from my conversations with various people about rights of access to information."

That same attitude informs his work today. “When people find out I work in cancer research, they come up with lots of questions. What causes cancer? Will there ever be a cure? What about cloning? It’s important that people understand what’s going on. The more they understand what the average scientist is trying to do, the less they’ll jump to the wrong conclusions.”

exotic enough, with its European-style cafes, beaches and Australian-ruled football.) An average day involves bench work, reading current literature, supervising graduate students, meetings, and, of course, drinking coffee.

The joy kicks in when he gets a good result that validates a hypothesis, discovers data that helps advance our

Andrew’s decision to focus on cancer research was sealed in his fourth year at Queen’s, when he spent most of his time in cancer research labs and then later at McGill, where his pursuit of a doctorate in Experimental Medicine found him once again in a cancer lab. Following this academic path has left him well supplied with highly transferable skills.

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understanding of cancer biology or works with people who share his passion for research. “It’s important to me to make a significant contribution to society. A lot of people gave a lot of themselves to help me get to where I am today, and I want to give something back to them in my own small way.”

For those considering post-graduate work, Andrew

“Science-based Ph.D.’s tend to develop certain skills — analyzing, thinking, problem-solving, communicating, planning, prioritizing — to a high level. They are capable of working both independently and as part of a team. These are all skills that non-science-based employers look for. Management consulting, for example, requires these skills. You just have to convince a potential employer who has little or no science background that you have the requisite skills. The point is that having a Ph.D. in a particular field in no way means you’re stuck there forever. Career-wise, the degree can actually give you a lot of flexibility.”

offers some hard-earned advice: Pick your supervisor carefully. “Talk to people outside a particular lab to get a feel for what the supervisor is like.” And apply for every cent you can. “Having your own scholarship or fellowship money gives you more options about where to go and what to do as either a Ph.D. student or postdoctoral fellow.”

Life as post-doc, he admits, is hardly glamorous. (Although Australia itself is

When he returns to Canada, Andrew plans to either continue basic research in his own lab or make a shift to industry, where research is aimed at finding more effective treatments for cancer. “I’m open to other possibilities, but right now things are moving too fast in my own field for me to really contemplate doing anything else. I really want to see where my present path ultimately leads.” ❖