

Women in Thoracic Surgery Interview: Dr. Carolyn Dresler, MD, MPA June 2012

WTS had the privilege of interviewing Dr. Carolyn Dresler on June 13, 2012. Dr. Dresler is currently the Medical Director of the Tobacco Prevention and Cessation Program for the Arkansas Department of Health. She received her medical degree from the University of Colorado and her Masters in Public Administration with a focus on leadership and negotiation from the JF Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.



WTS: What was your first experience with research and at what point in your life did it occur?

CD: I was a 4th year medical student in a microbiology laboratory at the University of Colorado. I studied DNA replication in *Bacillus subtilis*.

WTS: Please describe your research interests .

CD: My research focus involves tobacco and nicotine. It combines basic science, translational research and clinical research. Right now my main research interests involve: 1) nicotine and its effects on cancer treatment; 2) tobacco cessation in practicing oncologists; and 3) tobacco control policies specifically related to women in five European countries. I am also interested in signal transduction in cells.

WTS: Did you decide on this research subject or did it evolve from another project?

CD: My parents were both heavy smokers, one of my grandmothers died of lung cancer, and my grandfather and great grandfather both died of heart attacks. At 14 years of age, I found that I loved physiology and wanted to find a cure for cancer. During general surgery residency, I studied surgical nutrition, metabolism and intravenous nutrition. After I became a thoracic surgical oncologist and then had to leave surgery, I became interested in the different effects of tobacco between men and women, and particularly in tobacco use in women.

WTS: What percentage of your work time is devoted to research?

CD: About 10-15%

WTS: What are your main funding sources?

CD: I funded my basic science research several years ago from tax deductible honoraria I receive by giving lectures. Presently funding is with collaboration with other investigators.

WTS: What are your top two reasons for performing research?

CD: I enjoy the intellectual challenge and I want to make a difference in the world. I want to make things better.

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WTS: What are the things that frustrate you the most about performing research?

CD: Obstructive people and systems. People with big egos and politics.

WTS: Do you find that doing research allows more life/work balance?

CD: No. I have to do research on my own time. I have no protected time. I think my personality also plays into that.

WTS: What one piece of advice would you give to a woman thoracic surgeon or prospective woman thoracic surgeon who is considering research?

CD: Focus on what you love. Don't do something because it's expected. Research requires internal drive. Don't let other people tell you what to do and don't take "no" for an answer if you find something you are passionate about.

WTS: What do you think are the most important factors that have led to your success as a researcher?

CD: Persistence, connectivity and collaboration. You have to put your ego in your pocket. Research is so "not about me". I get more high from growing, partnering and sharing. It's more fun.

WTS: Have you ever changed institutions to improve your research resources, opportunities, productivity, or collaborative efforts?

CD: No

WTS: Who are your research mentors and at what institution are they?

CD: Charlie Van Way at the University of Colorado regarding cardiopulmonary bypass surgical products. Bill Robinson, also at the University of Colorado in the medical oncology lab that I worked in. I worked in Murray Brennan's lab for two years at Memorial Sloan Kettering studying cancer nutritional metabolism. Daiva Bajorunas studying endocrinology and surgical metabolism - also at MSKCC. Margie Clapper at Fox Chase Cancer Center helped me with exploring genetic polymorphisms in lung cancer patients who smoked.

WTS: Your career involves some governmental and regulatory positions. Please tell us how you got involved in these public health opportunities.

CD: It was fortuitous. When I was practicing thoracic surgery, I worked on the pulmonary lymph node mapping project. Because of the visibility of that project, I was invited to give talks that provided honoraria. With those funds, I started the "Carolyn Dresler Research Fund" at Fox Chase Cancer Center, which supported my laboratory research. After I was diagnosed with hepatitis C, I left surgery. I worked in industry at Smith Kline Beecham (GlaxoSmithKline) on tobacco cessation products and worked to have the products approved and successfully marketed.. I then went to the Kennedy School of Government to learn about policy development. After that, I went to the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) in Lyon, France. It was during this time that the Human Rights and Tobacco Control Network (HRTCN) was organized in conjunction with many global partners.

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WTS: Public policy is an arena in which many of us have no experience. Can you tell us what attracted you to public policy and what skills/interests would be especially helpful in those positions?

CD: I want fewer people to die from tobacco use. In order to achieve that, I have to work on population health. It requires working with legislators and policy development.

WTS: What type of impact have public policy positions had on your:

- a. Work schedule

CD: I like to juggle many balls. I probably have too many activities, but being busy brings great opportunities also.

- b. Home/family schedule

CD: My dog is my psychological savior.

- c. Academic/research activities

CD: Those blossomed. I love to connect.

- d. National/international visibility

CD: Marked increase. With the Institute of Medicine and their recent Tobacco and Cancer Symposium, I feel like we are finally pulling together multiple groups towards a mutual goal.

- e. Outlook on the current status of the medical field

CD: I am concerned about how medicine and training is changing; that the needs are so great and it seems have some disconnects in the changing environments that we're facing. We have much work to do.

WTS: What are the best and worst things about the public policy/regulatory positions that you are involved in?

CD: The worst things are duplicity and lack of transparency. Some others in this field have an agenda and are selfish enough to put their personal interests above the interests of the public. The best thing is that it's exciting, too fun, and too challenging, all in one.

WTS: How is funding for the work that needs to get done with public health issues?

CD: There is far too little funding to support public health needs in the US. The current administration with the Affordable Care Act has tried to increase public health funding - which support tobacco control. However, this funding is always in danger of being cut.

WTS: Are there any final words you would like to share with us?

CD: Do what your heart drives you to do. Don't take "no" for an answer. Don't say "can't".

WTS would like to thank Dr. Dresler for sharing the wisdom and knowledge that she has gained during her career as a national and international leader in global health and public policy. Dr. Dresler served as the vice president of Women in Thoracic Surgery from 2000 to 2004. She continues to study attitudes and patterns of tobacco use and fight for universal tobacco cessation.