



Gift in barbed wire?

Marla Shapiro MD

Work-life balance and work-life harmony are concepts that elude so many of us, despite the fact that, as physicians, we are always telling our patients how important a healthy lifestyle is and how valuable it is in keeping us well. Every day I discuss with patients what modifiable lifestyle factors are and how they can be changed. Perhaps the most difficult challenge for most people is finding that balance between work commitments and personal commitments, as we get pulled in many directions.

I often lecture about balancing work and family, quality of life with work, and stress management and work satisfaction. While it might seem like a lot of material to handle, it is clear that, unless we can balance our work and family, we are cheating our patients, our family, and most important, ourselves. As time has passed, I have finally begun to understand not only how important balance is, but also how difficult it is to achieve.

The juggler in all of us

In addition to practising family medicine full time, I am an Associate Professor in the Department of Family and Community Medicine at the University of Toronto in Ontario, medical consultant for the CTV television network, the medical contributor for *Canada AM* and *CTV National News*, and I was the host of the national television show called *Balance: Television for Living Well*. I am also a wife, a mother, a daughter, a sister, and a friend.

I give speeches about finding balance and talk about the balls we all juggle: the “work” ball, the “family” ball, and the “me” ball. While our hearts usually choose the family ball, in terms of waking hours, it seems that the work ball gets most of our time.

As the so-called expert, I remind my audiences that it is easier to juggle 2 balls than 3 and even easier to juggle 1 ball at a time. This reminder promotes the concept of giving ourselves permission to concentrate on the task at hand, and then move on to the next one when the time is right. It is an attempt to stop feeling conflicted, believing that we have to be in 3 places at once. We can be in only 1 place at a time, so we must decide

This article is based on a presentation by **Dr Shapiro** for the eighth annual **Carl Moore Lecture in Primary Care**. This annual lecture series is held to honour **Dr Carl Moore**, who was Chair of McMaster’s Department of Family Medicine from 1975 to 1985 and a leader in primary care innovation.

where we want to be and move along. It is a simple concept, but it does work.

Gathering dust

The 2 balls most important to me are the family ball and the work ball. The me ball often gets shoved into a corner to gather dust. I promise myself to get around to that ball, but there are too many competing interests and not enough time.

At CTV the running joke was that I would host the show until I got myself balanced. Mornings would find me taping the shows, which were both physically and mentally challenging. While I have spent more than a decade in front of the camera, hosting was a whole new experience. Suddenly being the driving force, asking the questions, and getting the right information across to the viewers in the allotted time was a new career. A lot of background preparation and self-education is involved in becoming a host. Afternoons would find me flying to the office to put on my “practising doctor” hat. Evenings I would sit down with the children, have a quick dinner, then do my homework for the next day’s show.

My most recent career addition was becoming a nationally syndicated health columnist for the *Globe and Mail*. Becoming a columnist also proved to be the impetus for looking at some difficult issues concerning the balance in my personal life. On Friday, August 13, 2004, I had a routine mammogram, which showed a suspect area that ultimately led to a diagnosis of breast cancer. On that day, I joined a club for which, until then, I had been the consultant. Diagnosing women, helping them sort through treatment options, explaining that all cancer is not the same, and helping them stay ahead of their anxiety is second nature to me. Suddenly finding myself inside the examination room looking out rather than outside looking in, I realized that an important new voyage was about to begin for me.

In many ways, where Dr Marla ended and just Marla began was poorly defined. I have been socialized for so many years to be a physician that it is inextricably woven into the fabric of who I am. I have been taught to be a clear thinker, a problem solver, and an evidence-based physician.

The day I was diagnosed with cancer I became a patient. That was foreign territory to me, and I have to

I am so much
more mindful of
the decisions I
make.

admit adjusting was not easy. A lot changed for me in that moment and in the subsequent months while I endured my chemotherapy, multiple surgeries, bilateral mastectomies, a hysterectomy, and ultimately reconstruction.

For one thing, I was home a lot. My children have grown up in a busy household with a mother who leaves early and comes home late. And, while they knew I was there for them, I was not always physically with them. I forced myself to keep up with *Canada AM* and other media commitments. I needed to hold on to a piece of me that was old and familiar. I could not practise medicine because chemotherapy rendered me leukopenic and constantly fatigued. I was a sitting duck for any infection. Practising medicine was like doing the tango in a mine field. I started baking and cooking. I rediscovered my kitchen. After a while the children began to complain they were gaining weight while I was gradually disappearing into the side effects of chemotherapy.

The year of diagnosis and treatment was spent living a different kind of life; I had the time to discover what I missed, what I had been missing, and how I wanted to reconstruct my life. While I loved being a doctor and practising medicine, and derived great pleasure and satisfaction from it, there was more than just the quality of my work life that made me a whole person.

The lesson I had always encouraged people to adopt was put into motion for me whether I wanted to accept it or not. A very large ball was put down for me to juggle, and as a result, both the emotional and time commitment to my family became more synchronous. I realized how selfish my career decisions had been. While we often think of currency in terms of dollars and cents, it became clear that the currency of time spent, memories made, and activities done together were far more meaningful and far more important.

September 2005 found me healthy and strong as ever, bounding out the door to assume my position once again behind the stethoscope. I have relished the return, but I am not the same woman who left the office in 2004.

Gift in barbed wire

How have I changed? In many ways I am the same, juggling many work balls and loving the return. But in other ways I am different. The only word I can think of to describe this change is *mindful*. I am so much more mindful of the decisions I make, my family, my children, and how I choose to live my life. My children would say my values have changed, and perhaps they are wiser than their mother. I have finally learned how to match my emotional commitments with my time commitments.

It has been said that cancer is a gift in barbed wire. If you get past the difficulty in unravelling the wire, there is a gift inside. For me, the gift has been to be more aware of what I do, when I do it, and the way in which I make decisions. Many people ask me whether this experience has made me a more empathetic doctor. While it has made me more aware, it has also enabled me to genuinely understand the frustrations and fears many patients with chronic and life-threatening diseases face. It is a challenge to stay mindful and remain committed to making decisions that are both meaningful and important to me, learning to balance all 3 balls as I embrace them all so whole-heartedly. ❁

Dr Shapiro practises family medicine in Toronto, and is an Associate Professor in the Department of Family and Community Medicine at the University of Toronto in Ontario.

Correspondence to: Dr Marla Shapiro, 75 The Donway W, Suite 602, Don Mills, ON M3C 2E9; telephone 416 445-4067; e-mail mshapiro@ctv.ca