*Inspiring Stories* **Associate Professor Michelle Telfer**

9 May 2023

Transcript

**NATALIE HANNAN:** It’s my great pleasure to acknowledge this "Inspiring Stories" conversation is being recorded on the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nations, custodians and leaders of this incredible and beautiful land and waters for thousands upon thousands of years. I wish to take to acknowledge and pay my respects to their elders, past and present. I recognise the contribution of our First Nations colleagues and students and their important efforts and contribution to our academy.

I'm Professor Natalie Hannan, the Associate Dean, Diversity and Inclusion, for the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences. I resolutely believe that we all have the right to a safe, fair, and equitable workplace, where an individual's gender, sexuality and sexual orientation, background, race, where disability or mental health issues should not be a barrier to reaching their full potential. Our faculty is certainly rich in impressive and accomplished women breaking barriers and challenging the status quo. Yet, they're not always represented, particularly at the senior levels. Important work is still needed around gender equality and broader diversity and inclusion. I hope that these conversations that we have in "Inspiring Stories" will highlight the various barriers our people face and challenge our systems and celebrate diversity from within. I hope that this will inspire leadership and enhance belonging within our faculty, allowing all to reach their full potential.

I am thrilled to introduce our very inspirational guest today, Associate Professor Michelle Telfer. Michelle is a Pediatrician, and Adolescent Medicine Physician, and the Acting Chief of Medicine at the Royal Children's Hospital. Prior to this, Michelle was director of the Department of Adolescent Medicine and the Royal Children's Hospital Gender Service. Michelle has been vital in the development and expansion of the clinical and research programs for trans-specific healthcare in children and adolescents. Michelle is an advocate for improved access to medical treatment, and was central to the achievement of federal legal reform in enabling transgender young people access to hormone and surgical treatment without the need for approval by the Family Court of Australia. She's also led the inaugural Australian Clinical Guidelines for Trans and Gender Diverse Children and Adolescents, which was endorsed through in "The Lancet. Michelle has given expert testimony to the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System in 2020 and has provided expert advice on transgender health issues to the Victorian Government. Michelle has been on the board of directors of the Australian Professional Association for Trans Health, or AusPATH, and was president for the final two years of this tenure. Michelle has received many, many awards, and notably in 2017, the Globe Community Award for LGBT Ally of the Year, as well as the President's Award by Thorne Harbour Health in 2021. She received a Lifetime Achievement Award and two Ministerial Mental Health Awards for Excellence in Consumer Leadership and Advocacy at the Vic Public Healthcare. In 2022, Michelle was inducted into the Victorian Honour Roll of Women.

Before her impactful career in medicine, Michelle was a Olympic and Commonwealth Games gymnast. At the age of 16, she won silver and bronze in the 1990 Commonwealth Games in Auckland and was a member of the 1992 Olympic gymnastics team in Barcelona. Michelle, incredible and very inspiring. Thank you so much for joining me today.

**MICHELLE TELFER:** Thanks, Natalie.

**NATALIE HANNAN:** It's really great to have you. For our audience who don't know much about your earlier career, I was hoping we might find out a little bit more about your story. Are you happy to share with us where you grew up and how you found your passion for gymnastics?

**MICHELLE TELFER:** I grew up in Perth, in the suburbs of Pert, and my first experience of gymnastics was literally copying my neighbour who used to teach me cartwheels and handstands on the front lawn. And when she went to gymnastics on a Monday, I used to tag along with her and essentially begged my parents to let me go and join the class when I was five years of age. And yeah, things sort of went from there in terms of just going along once a week. It was really just a suburban gymnastics club, nothing too special really. And then when I was about seven, Liz Chetkovich, who became my coach until I finished at the age of 18, Liz had gone around to a number of gymnastics clubs in Perth and had picked out 10 kids to start her special team that she was going to train a bit more frequently and hopefully pursue a career in gymnastics. And I was one of those 10, just really by chance, in the right place at the right time. And there was something that Liz saw in me at age seven that no one else, and anyone else could see but because I just loved gymnastics, I was keen to do as much as anyone would let me, really.

**NATALIE HANNAN:** On that note, I recall I heard that perhaps at one point, I guess in your early career, there was a moment where maybe your parents didn't quite appreciate the level of passion and commitment that you had and weren't sure how much they were going to allow their young, or how much time they actually had to drive their young child to gymnastics several times a week. Do you want share with the audience a little bit?

**MICHELLE TELFER:** When I was about nine, my coach, so Liz Chetkovich decided to increase the hours and the days of training during the week. I can say for certain that my parents were never the pushy parents. They were always quite concerned about the amount of time that I was spending at gymnastics. And when Liz approached my parents and said, "I'd like Michelle to be training four days a week," my parents were horrified and said, "No, that's definitely not happening, "that's not normal." They actually sort of said that they weren't going to take me to gym anymore in that context. And I said that I would stop talking to them, or stop talking to my Dad, specifically, until he started driving me to training. And I stood by my word, well, literal, well, not my word because I was still on mute.

But after a couple of weeks, my mum, who was beside herself ended up getting in a child psychologist to mediate between my Dad and me. And the psychologist spent some time with me, spent some time with my dad, and then came back to my parents and apparently said to them, "You're gonna have to give in because she's not going to." And I won that little battle. And it sort of continued through my childhood and adolescence, with trying to balance gymnastics and school and social aspects of being a teenager and things. And even though I might have won that battle, when I was in year 10, and I was actually training and competing at a Commonwealth Games level, and my Dad made a comment, and I love him for it and it's not a criticism, but he said, "Why can't you just hang out "at Hungry Jack's like all the other kids do?" And in Perth, where we lived, there was a Hungry Jack's down the road where kids would hang out after school. And I thought, eh, that's just not what I want to do. It's not who I am.

**NATALIE HANNAN:** Yeah, it speaks to the, I think, the things that you've done since that time. I guess that's where you had to develop your voice and know what you wanted to do and what you would stand by. And it sounds like you were pretty sure you knew what that was, and I think that's beautiful. My daughter, she is obsessed with gymnastics; she watches gymnastics shows on TV as well as goes to Acrogym, and I can see such a passion. I'm trying to encourage her to do other things, and she knows that's what she wants. So I'll be sharing this story with her. So, thinking about that, I think when I look at the age you were, this is happening right through primary school into high school, it's really quite a testament to any young athlete. But how was this at such a young age, venturing off to eventually going to the Commonwealth Games and to the Olympics? It must have been quite full on for a child at that time, or did you even realise that?

**MICHELLE TELFER:** I think there's something in that kind of question in terms of training and competing at a young age. It feels normal, it feels you don't know any alternative. I started traveling at the age of 11, it was the first time I went to a national championship, and it continued from there pretty regularly. When I was between the ages of about 15 to 18, I was away from home, often sort of five or six months of the year, either competing or training with the national team in Canberra. So I missed a lot of school, and I became independent, I have to say. We were always supported by coaches and people to look after us, and I always sort of felt safe, but I did feel like a pretty independent young person. And I also loved that sense of doing pretty grown-up things, actually, in terms of traveling the world and having experiences that no one else was having. I remember in, it was around 1989, and my friends were going on Outward Bound Camp, and they were all complaining about having to be out camping in the middle of Winter and being cold. And someone asked me a question, and I'd stayed really quiet because I knew that I was going to Germany at the World Championships at that same time, and I was really embarrassed to mention it. But at the same time kind of glad that, one, I wasn't going camping, and secondly, that I was fortunate enough to have these incredible opportunities. In 1990, the year that I went to Commonwealth Games, not long after that, I had a competition in Moscow and then competed in what was still then East Germany, and it was a really incredible experience because it was the time of Perestroika, and I was aware that McDonald's had just opened for the first time in Moscow. And we were reading about how people would spend two weeks of their wages just buying a hamburger and fries, and that they would line up for hours and hours for this kind of experience and it just seemed so bizarre. But as a 16-year-old, seeing history unfold, and going from Moscow to and from West to East Germany, and the Berlin Wall was still coming down, and--

I bought a piece of the Berlin Wall home with me and took it to my social studies class. And they were all still carrying on about how awful Outward Bound Camp was. And I was like, "Look, I've got a bit of the Berlin Wall." And I didn't quite say it like that 'cause I was actually quite shy and used to talk myself down a bit at school to try and fit in. But at the same time, I was just feeling incredibly privileged with the opportunity that no teenager that I knew would have. And it really has stayed with me as an adult, how privileged I was. And also, it highlights to me how interested I was in the politics at the time, and I did at school, despite ending up in a STEM career, I actually did economics, politics, and English literature. I think partly because as I was studying as I was traveling and doing a lot of reading and just interested in what was going on around me. So it's an amazing childhood really when I think about it.

**NATALIE HANNAN:** Yeah, it's so exciting, and as you say, that you recognise that privilege and that you were having a slightly different experience of childhood to some of the kids you were going to school with. But then I'm sure you had some friends within the gymnastics team that you were going through all of this together. But yeah, what an incredible opportunity. And all through achievement, things that you were doing that were, winning medals, you were among the best in the world.

**MICHELLE TELFER:** Thank you, yeah. The friendships I had with my gymnastics team were really, really strong, because it wasn't easy.

Training 35 hours a week and trying to do school at the same time. And whilst I did love the traveling, getting off a long-haul flight and going into a gymnastics hall that you'd never been in before, and having just to train when you were injured or didn't feel like it or what have you, and it’s pretty high pressure competing at that level as a teenager. But we did have a tight team, and we still stay in touch actually 30 years on. We all came from different sides of the country. Actually, one of the gymnasts that I trained with was from Thursday Island, which is the most northern tip of Queensland. So from that to our small group from Perth, we really did stretch across the country. And coming together to do training camps or competing was a joy in that respect, to see each other and hang out again. And you would literally spend most of the day together, and it did get you through some of the difficulties. And yeah, it was an amazing time.

**NATALIE HANNAN:** Yeah, and I see that in these careers in academia. Sometimes it's the peer networks that's different from where you grew up as a child and developed, but you're often going through similar things, similar pressures, as you were saying, similar time demands. And so, these friendships form more out of the fact that you're now peers and you can support each other going through some of these things. So it's something I always try, in our mentoring program, to encourage our, women come together just to talk about some of the things that they're going through, the challenges and trying to balance teaching or research, as well as trying to do things out of the box maybe or writing a promotion application itself. So there's so much in that network, I think, that's really important.

**MICHELLE TELFER:** I guess the other thing I would just add, Natalie, it made me think about that despite living in this world that was elite sport, and competitive, and so forth, as a group, there wasn't much competition between us. Maybe it was because we, at that time, we were never gonna win an Olympic gold medal or be World Champions. Subsequently, Australian gymnasts have done that. But when I was competing, we would sort of just, that was just before. We excelled in our own space because we were such a tight team. And we knew that if we, we just didn't, we didn't compete individually, we competed together. And it's rare that you see that in academia or in the hospital systems where there's a lot of high-achieving people who have huge, sometimes enormous goals, and not for all the right reasons. But you see the people get to that point when they have a really close team and a network where there's collegiality and a genuine desire for each other to do well. I think that's been the key to me enjoying my time in medicine. And I think partly to where I've been able to sort of grow is just in making those friendships, and helping other people, and surrounding myself with great people that, yeah, there's that mutual sense of togetherness.

**NATALIE HANNAN:** Yeah, I couldn't agree more. I think to have real impact, it usually has to be a team and with a common goal or shared values. But for sure, I think, and with the promotions as well, I always try and talk through to the group that it's not a piece of pie. You can all actually achieve this. And if you help each other see each other's strengths, then that could be really, really great. So touching on, when I think you were thinking about your next career, because obviously, gymnastics wasn't gonna go forever for you, but did you ever think, and I know you found medicine, but did at that time in that transition when you were probably trying to decide what you would do after, did you ever think you'd find something you loved as much as gymnastics?

**MICHELLE TELFER:** Yeah, it's, it's a good question. When I was sort of towards the very end of my career and I had a lot of injuries, as we all did at that time, it sort of felt old at 18, which is kind of sad, but that's how it was. I spent a lot of time with a physio and there was a sports physician who used to help our team and we had a sports psychologist as well. So I was surrounded by people who were really engaged in, not just the medical, but the mental health aspects of care. And I think that that's certainly shaped where I've gone. And I had made a decision when I was in year 12 to try and, well, made a decision that I wanted to do medicine, but was completely aware that going to the Olympics and doing year 12, and getting into medicine was ridiculous goal. So I had the goal just to get through school and to get into something at uni, and started a science degree, and then transferred over to medicine. And it was in my year of science that I got exposed to just full uni life, let's say, which I loved, but also did some art subjects and some science subjects, and was able to solidify a pathway that I wanted to take and was fortunate enough to get into medicine just the second year that I was at uni. I'm sure it's much harder now, but back in the early '90s, they had a proportion of people that they let in through science, halfway through a degree. So I was very lucky to get into that.

**NATALIE HANNAN:** I think just linking it into, not necessarily knowing it was medicine--

**MICHELLE TELFER:** - Not knowing, yeah.

**NATALIE HANNAN:** But that I guess you were interested in science and art and medicine was obviously something that you felt inside earlier, but I can appreciate that. You don't necessarily, not everyone has the same linear pathway in year 11 and 12 to get into the course that they'll eventually follow. But I think that's, inspirational, and also true of many. I don't think there's a lot of people even on this, in the Zoom room today that might have started somewhere and ended up somewhere slightly different.

**MICHELLE TELFER:** Yeah, and for me, finding medicine wasn't necessarily about just loving the lectures - it was all interesting. But I think what I loved about studying medicine was the fact that I found a group of people that I did share common values with and had a great time with and, I suddenly felt that I had purpose. And there was a sense of camaraderie in that and also just having a group that you, there's a commitment for a long period of time in terms of where you're going and there's something about the certainty that I quite enjoyed and the identity that I also appreciated. Because going from gymnastics or going from any high-level sport to suddenly finishing, and it is literally one day you're at the Olympics and the next day you're back at school as a school student in a school uniform, thinking, "Oh my God, what am I gonna do now?" And 40 hours of time in your week that is now not built with a structure. And identity is a really important aspect for all of us. And I went from being thin and fit and strong and, just feeling... Like I knew every day what I was gonna be doing and how I was gonna be doing it, what I was gonna eat, when I was gonna go to bed, and sleep, and all that sort of stuff to literally having no structure in my life and needing to find kind of my place in the world, and medicine actually, allowed me to do that. I still feel really grateful for that, for finding that, because a lot of people don't find it or take a long time to find it, and that can be really a torturous path I think for many.

**NATALIE HANNAN:** Yeah, particularly for mental health. When a lot of elite athletes that's, like you're saying, that identity and then all of a sudden, you're no longer that because you can't, your body can't do that anymore. So it's that purpose and I think, yeah, it's been great to hear how medicine became, it had another purpose for you to have impact and achieve. So yeah, I think it's incredible. As I mentioned in the introduction, I'm thinking about how paramount you were in the legal reform that now means trans adolescents are able to access improved healthcare and support. That's huge purpose and achievement. Such a huge achievement and a testament to your leadership. How did you get, and maybe it came from some of the experiences you had earlier throughout your life, but how did you get the medical, legal, and the community to come together on work collaboratively on this? Because I think that leadership is why you were successful.

**MICHELLE TELFER:** Yeah, that's a good question. So when I started working in trans health, we were the only place in the country that, this is at the Royal Children's Hospital, we were the only trans service formally at that stage. And in terms of my learning in this space, I did a lot of reading, obviously, and was open to a whole sort of raft of educational opportunities. But at the same time, I think I learned more from just listening to my patients and their parents than I learned from anyone else. And every young person who came to see me had their own story, their own struggles, their own achievements and joy. And it was putting all of those things together.

I never felt, as many doctors often feel, that they know the most of anyone in the room because I genuinely felt that I was coming in as someone who was there to learn from them and that they were the experts because they were and they still are. It was that I think as the basis for making sure that anything we tried to do included the young people and their parents because it was very clear to me that they were the ones who knew what they needed most. And you could never assume that what one person needs, another person needs. So we had to embrace that knowledge and that expertise, that lived experience.

And also, when it came to improving their care through access and through legal reform, I thought, well, we've got the medical knowledge, we've got the lived experience expertise, and there were some incredible legal experts who work in human rights law who wanted to help. And when we were going to meetings with politicians where we were trying to educate and inform and advocate, what having all of us in the room did was enable us to answer any question that came up with a sense of authority, I guess. And much of the time, almost, well, I can say almost always for me, I never met with someone without, a young person, a parent, and one of the human rights lawyers because it just, it was powerful to have that group together.

It's not the statistics or the medical, the legal expertise that helps change someone's mind. It's hearing it firsthand from the child or the adolescent or the young person and the impact that the law may have on that family. So there was some great research that had been done looking at the impact of going to court to access treatment and the impact that had on families, parents in particular, the financial burden, the emotional burden, the stress, the time and how it pathologised their family having to go to court. And I can talk about that till the cow's come home, but no one's gonna really take it in and remember it as they would if that story was told in the first person from those families. And you know how people say, "People don't remember what you say, "but they'll always remember how you made them feel?"

Having those kids in the room and the parents, they create an incredible sense of purpose about why things need to be different. And yeah, I guess I embraced it. It's what changed--

It's what changed my practice and the way I, well, that's how I shape my practice. It seems to be powerful in lots of other contexts as well.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

Yeah, it's so important and we talk more and more about this all the time now, co-design and collaboration. All of these things - what we're fighting for or who we're trying to help or support and serve - I always think about not for us, without us. So I think it's so powerful when people, as you say, with lived experience actually share what this would mean for them. 'Cause sometimes, those bureaucracies, they're not listening or looking at that. They're listening to other opinions or other rumors or other people's views whereas we should be listening to the people who it's gonna impact. But it must have been, it's still a really tricky time. And for the audience, when I was looking at some of the research around having today's conversation, over a period of around 10 months or so in 2019 and 2020, The Australian newspaper published around 50 articles with inaccurate information on gender-affirming healthcare. And I think looking at your amazing leadership in this space, I know you took this to the Australian Press Council, but that was difficult for you as well personally because you received horrendous harassment throughout this time. Can you tell us about how you were able to keep going and what support you had? Because there's many in our faculty who are fighting for, not the same thing, but really important things and sometimes I think it's hard. So, any support that you had or any words of advice that you got through this time?

**MICHELLE TELFER:** Yeah, look, it was a really hard time, and for me, the lesson really was that if you do make change, and positive change, and at a societal level, there will always be pushback. And I learned the hard way. I wouldn't change anything. But I had to keep reminding myself that the only reason why they're targeting me is because I'm being successful. And that if I wasn't able to change things for trans kids, if I wasn't able to improve their human rights and if I wasn't able to make their lives more visible and more accepted, and more enjoyable, then no one would care what I did or said. So I had to keep reminding myself of that because it was a really awful time, made me very, very anxious.

The first time that it happened, and it kind of started out of the blue because we've been doing advocacy pretty strongly for about 9 or 10 years, and things had sort of, I received some pushback, but it was only after we changed the law, after we wrote national guidelines that were accepted by The Lancet as guidelines that should be followed internationally. I think having that international influence, I suddenly found myself at the centre.

But the way I found out that I was at the centre was literally waking up on a Saturday morning to my phone going nuts. I was like, "Oh, why is my phone going crazy? "I'm not on call today." And there was a headline in The Australian newspaper that said something to the effect of, "Transgender doctors, they are castrating children and abusing our defenceless young." And the article was essentially about me. And they went on, as you said, Natalie, to write 50 articles over the next year that mentioned me and my work. And actually, there were 282 mentions of me and my work over that 12-month period. And I would wake up every morning thinking, "I wonder what they're gonna write about me today." 'Cause all I was doing was getting up and going to work and doing my job. And especially in COVID, this was during COVID-19 time. I was getting up, going to work, doing my job, and they seemingly were able to find things to write about me every couple of days. None of it was true. It's all just propaganda and misinformation. I got chest pain from the anxiety and I saw a cardiologist and then I knew it was anxiety, but just 'cause I'm a doctor and I need to sort of reassure myself of all the worst things you can imagine that go through your head. And then I saw a psychiatrist, and was able to just talk through things regularly which will get it off my chest so that I could keep getting up and going to work. There were moments in time where I felt really just really proud of being able to survive it and get through it. We had parents of trans kids who sent in cards and flowers and biscuits, and one time we turned up for a team meeting and we had all this food and we're like, "Oh, what's going on with all the food?" And they're like, "It's from the parents. "They're wanting to let you know that as a team, "they appreciate what you're doing and please keep going." So there were moments of sort of reassurance from the people that we cared about the most that we were doing the right thing. And that's how we, how I kept going, was hearing it from them. I got down to the clinic on a Thursday, had a clinic where all I did really was see trans kids and their parents and, that was all the reassurance I needed, that this is just something that we have to keep pushing for.

After about a year and realising that The Australian newspaper was not gonna stop, that it was never just gonna peter out, that the culture war and the anti-trans movement was going to only escalate, I made a decision to fight back in my own way. And it's pretty clear to me that there's no point fighting them on Twitter, you/’re just start wasting your time. And I think a lot of their modus operandi in terms of attacking us is to stop us doing our work. So I didn't want to waste time having little public battles. What I did was I took every single article that had ever been written about me by The Australian, took a week off work, and I did an audit of each article and cross-referenced it with the peer-reviewed medical literature on trans health, and essentially undid all of their arguments. And then submitted it to the Press Council, pretty much itemisng all the Press Council guidelines and how they've been breached over that year.

They found in my favor, which was a fantastic sort of validation for me. And it has ultimately stopped them reporting on me personally. Not completely, but they needed to change the context somewhat. And what was extraordinary though was that the Press Council, they made a judgment that The Australian needed to print the adjudication in the newspaper on a particular date and in a particular spot in the paper. And they did that, it was on page two, and they had to write all the breaches that they had done. And then as you sort of skip over to the editorial in the paper that day, they had written an editorial that essentially berated me and stated that I was an emotional woman with no credibility and that I'd had my feelings hurt, which is why I'd complained to the Press Council. So it was just this really kind of interesting day where I thought, well, we've got to this point, and really, no one's ever gonna win this 'cause it's just, it's awful. It's awful for everyone. It's awful for the trans kids, it's awful for their parents, it's awful for their doctors and everyone, psychologists, nursing staff who look after them. And what we need to do is just continue to do our work and to hold our heads up high and to be proud and to keep going. And that's what we're still trying to do.

**NATALIE HANNAN:** Yeah, yeah, and that's what they're trying to do. As you say, it's the stop the impact that you're having. So I think it's so impressive that you are able to fight them with science and really do that. But of course, they still will be able to put the editorial piece and the opinion about hysterical women or women who are weak and emotional when we really know that that's many of our superpower. So it's fine, 'cause that's what drives what we do.

**MICHELLE TELFER:** Totally.

**NATALIE HANNAN:** So I think that let them say what they, you know, within reason, obviously. But yeah, I think it's just incredible leadership that you've demonstrated throughout that time and the lives and the impact you've had for those families is incredible.

Michelle, thank you so much for sharing your time with us today, thanks for sharing some of the highs and some of the lows, but I think ultimately, the wisdom and just the inspiration to keep going. So thank you so much.

For the audience, we will be back on June 13th with Dr. Flora Hui and we're gonna have a great conversation about Flora's journey and her career. So that will be fantastic. So, but again, Michelle, just before you head off back to your busy day, thank you again so much for everything, for sharing so generously.

**MICHELLE TELFER:** Thank you, it was a pleasure.