MDHS SUPPORTING WOMEN IN SWiM INSPIRING STORIES

7 DECEMBER 2021

**ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR LILON BANDLER**

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

**NATALIE HANNAN**

I'd like to acknowledge that today I'm hosting the Inspiring Stories webinar on the lands of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nations who have been custodians and leaders of this incredible and beautiful land and waters for thousands of years. I wish to take this opportunity to acknowledge and pay all of our respects to their elders past, present, and emerging, and also the traditional owners of the land that you are situated on today. And welcome to all of you. So for those who don't know me, I'm Associate Professor Natalie Hannan, the Associate Dean, Diversity and Inclusion, for the faculty of Medicine, Dentistry, and Health Sciences. And I believe that we have the right to a safe, fair, and equitable workplace, a place where gender, sexuality and sexual orientation, disability, mental health issues, and an individual's background or race should not be a barrier to reaching their full potential. And we are surrounded by impressive and accomplished women breaking barriers and challenging the status quo regarding women and what women can achieve. And yet, in 2021, women still remain underrepresented at the senior and leadership levels within our faculty. I hope that by having conversations that challenge our systems and inspire leadership from within, this will not only support our talented women in MDHS to reach their full potential, but also I hope it'll shine a really important light on the barriers that women face.

Today I'm really fortunate to be joined by **Associate Professor Lilon Bandler** as my inspiring guest. Lilon is Principal Research Fellow for the Leaders in Indigenous Medical Education, or many of you will know better as the LIME Network at the University of Melbourne. She has a long history of involvement in medical education across the healthcare sector. Lilon is also a member of the Macquarie University's Humanities and Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee. She also provides regular GP services to rural and remote Western New South Wales. She has been a member of the Far West Local Health District's New South Wales Board since 2018. At the Sydney Medical School, between 2006 and 2019, she managed the Mission Pathways and provided a comprehensive support program for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander medical students. She developed, implemented, and evaluated the Indigenous Health Education Program. Lilon, thank you so much for joining me today, especially at this busy time of the year. I know you're incredibly busy. You are an inspiration to so many, both academically, clinically, and also those you serve in the community.

**LILON BANDLER**

Thank you, Natalie. I must say that if I'd known you were going to read out that bio, I would've made it considerably shorter. I join you from the land of the Guringai people here in Sydney, part of the Eora Nation, just the north of Sydney, just south of Newcastle on the East Coast of Australia. And I take this moment to also acknowledge the lands of the people I serve when I work in my clinical capacity: the Barkindji, the Muthi Muthi, Wilyakali, Ngiyampaa, the Mwa-te-gali, the Malyangapa, and the Wangkumara. And I take this moment to pay my respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who may be joining us today, and take this moment to recognize that we all join you from unceded lands. Thank you.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

Thanks so much for that, Lilon, and it's wonderful always to hear the different lands from the people that come to speak with us in the Inspiring Stories. So thank you so much for your acknowledgement. I thought, if we can, let's start today's conversation with finding out a little more about you since I had to dig a bit deeper from the bio that you sent me through, so many amazing accomplishments. But I'm hoping we can focus maybe on your journey and your incredible career in medical education so far.

- Yes, I guess that I always think of it as an accidental career, I must confess. I think one of my unfinished degrees, and I have a number, was a degree where I was training to be a teacher librarian at a high school. And I think that I've always had that interest in teaching and being taught, and always, if nothing else, teaching myself and having conversations with myself about how to do things better. So I think I drifted into medical education in that way. And then, when I was a registrar, a trainee in general practice, I was asked to run an education program for junior medical staff in the Area Health Service I was working in. So there were five hospitals, and we would run a program on a Thursday morning, I remember, for years, essentially providing them with education, but more importantly with quarantine time which is rare in the life of a junior doctor. Quarantine time for education, we took them off the hospital campus, provided them with breakfast, and they had no access to their pagers. It was in a time before mobile phones were as easily available as well. And so that was really the start of my working medical education, and I just proceeded on from there, really.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

Wonderful. And so I think I like how you're saying an accidental or you drifted into. You mentioned that you did start some other degrees. Did you want to share any of that with us and, I guess, what the detour meant, and maybe if there was something that came up that drew you to going in a different direction?

- So I left school and started a science degree, which I did extremely poorly in. And the reason I know that is because that was at the same university that I returned to quite some time later to do my medical degree. So on my transcript from that university, it does have my medical degree there, but it actually starts out with the four failed science subjects at the top of that transcript. So I'm conscious that many of the people I work with have much more linear...

- Pathways.

- Pathways and linear understanding of what their pathway will be. Whereas if you had asked me, when I left school, where do you think you'll be, even in 10 years let alone in 30 years' time, I had no idea. And I've always been quite amazed at people who are very clear about the path that they expect to take. I can remember on one occasion having my hair cut by somebody who told me that he had wanted to be a hairdresser since he was nine years old.

- Wow.

- And I just had no concept of that. So yes, I think many of the turns and twists have been accidental. And I don't regret any of those, but I'm bemused by them; especially, I guess when I read of other people's careers and life stories that seem so much more direct.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

I think there's a lot to be said for the spiral pathway rather than the traditional linear, and I think it can make for a more meaningful experience and career journey, so it's really interesting. I'm interested to find out a bit more about what drew you to the LIME Network.

**LILON BANDLER**

The LIME Network was established in 2005. And not long after that, I was appointed to University of Sydney Medical School, and my work was in Indigenous Health Education. And I became part of the LIME Network Reference Group, which is an ongoing body that continues today. And I came to realize that working in Indigenous Health Education can be a very lonely business. My colleagues doing that work I know are often the only person in their so-called unit. And they spend a lot of their time, as I did when I was in that position, essentially fielding pressures to perform, to produce OSCEs, to produce a curriculum in Indigenous Health, et cetera, but with no evidence of support even though they're acclaimed. And the Reference Group, when I was a member of the Reference Group, was an important opportunity to have a sense of community, to feel support, to feel shared challenges, to feel that I didn't have to argue my case, to feel that other people had the same experiences. That was a hugely affirming experience for me. And now as part of the LIME Secretariat, I really strive to ensure that the members of our Reference Group now have that same opportunity, because I'm conscious that, in a Faculty of Medicine or at School of Medicine, they can feel quite isolated. And I think that actually that is shared across many of the healthcare professions; and certainly, at one stage, LIME Network talked extensively to similar people in similar healthcare education professions and found similar experiences. And so I think that idea that a network actually acts as something of a safety net, I think, is a really important one. And for me, that's a really important part of LIME Network and a sense of belonging.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

It is incredible work to bring together that network of leaders who are committed to working towards better ways to support Indigenous Medical Education and then the medical healthcare sector for Indigenous people. So it's incredible, and I know that there's still work to be done, but I think it's really a great network that's been established and very important work that's happening, ongoing. I guess next I was pondering on some of the conversations you and I have had. And I know you've also had these kinds of conversations with your colleagues across different areas of both clinical work and academic work. And that's around the rocky journey, the mistakes that we've made, and maybe not regrets, but looking back, we think, "God, that possibly wasn't the best way to go about that or the most direct journey." We've talked a lot about how our junior colleagues, and even our children, often, our journeys aren't apparent, and they see us as these perfect, finished products. And I guess it's pretty daunting to have that appearance of perfection. Can you tell us any of your thoughts on this, and why it's important that we talk about these journeys, and I guess sometimes the imperfection that we are?

**LILON BANDLER**

I think it's important, because you're right. I think our children, or certainly my children, and more junior colleagues certainly see someone who is articulate and intelligent and able to wind my way in a useful way through things, intellectually. And that's not to say that I can't, or don't do those things, I do, but it is to recognize that I should be able to do this. It's been decades. I'm 66. Let me say it publicly and openly. And I've been doing this for a long time. I didn't look like this even 10 years ago, or let alone 20 or 30 years ago, whether it was in my clinical practice or as an academic. I didn't have what I have now, which I think is a bigger portfolio, a bigger repertoire of responses, of experiences, of understanding. And I think if you only look to what you aspire to, you can forget that there is a place for being the person who fumbles, for being the person who fails, for being the person who makes a mistake, for being the person who has unfinished work littered through their history, who makes imperfect decisions, because that's what you're meant to do on the way. I mean, at one stage, I thought I'd be a plumber. Okay? I didn't go straight from school into medicine. And so I have a truck driver's license: I thought that would be a useful thing. The only really useful thing is for when we do a little bit of de-hoarding from my house, and I drive the truck on the way to the tip.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

I love it. Very practical.

**LILON BANDLER**

That's right, I'm really good at changing gears and double-clutching. I just think that it's not that that time is wasted, and it's not that that time is to no purpose. It's just I think that it adds to my ability to be a better person, to be a better clinician, to be less careless about other people and their experiences, and to be more conscious of people's frailties, to be, I guess, a more aware human being.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

Yeah, and I think it's the experiences that we travel through or go through on our journey that actually do make us more empathetic humans. And we can see, if we're open to it, we can see, for others, some of their challenges and the barriers that they face. And therefore, I think it's really important, our experiences, actually. And so I think the winding career trajectory with all the different experiences and the not-knowings and the failures sometimes actually shape us to be better leaders as well, which I think is really important. And I think it's a really important issue to shine the light on, especially when we're trying to enhance diversity, inclusion, and equity. And part of the work for ourselves, I believe, comes from that authenticity in embracing the imperfect journey that perhaps took us to where we are meant to be, but we didn't know it. As you say, maybe we accidentally stumbled upon this wonderful job that we've got. Why do you think it's important that we do tell these stories about the imperfect aspects of ourselves or our journeys for those that are, I guess, our junior colleagues coming through?

**LILON BANDLER**

I think that it gives other people hope. And particularly in the last two years, I think hope has been a difficult thing to hold on to at times. But I think if you see that somebody who you wish to be, or aspire to be like, actually had a difficult or at least a messy journey on the way, I think that gives you hope that in time you will find your own space. I think part of the challenge is a recognition that, for me, for example, I had no idea in my twenties or even my thirties where I would end up and how my life would be. And I felt like everybody else around me had this sorted. Of course, they didn't, because we fail to tell people about the floundering, about the uncertainty, about the insecurity, about the anxiety, because that's not really what gets celebrated. It's the achievements and the awards, and the status and the credibility, that gets noted and that gets put up. The fact that I make a great shortbread does not get put anywhere. It's not even in that bio you wrote out.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

Well, now I know for next time. But it's exactly right, and I think this is really important that we do talk about. I make sure that I have a team of women in my research labs that I always, whenever there is something that is an accolade or an award, I always tell them, yes. This is wonderful, and we must celebrate, because if we don't celebrate the wins, then what's it all for? But I also am very, very careful to always let them know that there's been six or seven other things I've applied for that I didn't even get shortlisted for. And the reason I do that is actually to normalize this idea of... I don't really like the word failure, but sometimes we're unsuccessful at the things we try for; and it's okay, because there will be days when we do win and we celebrate. But it's also to recognize and remember that it's not an easy journey, and it's not that perfect, the side that I guess we put up for some of the world, because that's the way the system, I guess, has pushed us towards celebrating all these successes. So I think it's important we pass that on to the next generation.

**LILON BANDLER**

I think that's right. I think that the system more broadly celebrates the winners, and the stories of other people who have gone on to other things get lost. And I was talking recently about some research in chronic pain, for example, will this particular approach to managing chronic pain be useful? And we were reflecting on the fact that if people don't find it useful, and they drop out, and they're no longer part of your dataset, then you don't find out what actually that was about for that group of people. You only looked at the people for whom this has been successful. And I think that's not just clearly in our data gathering, but really in our lives. We celebrate people who are at the peak and who are people who have achieved, as we say it. People who just meander on, which is what I feel like I do, actually, that we don't talk about that in the same way. I mean, I think the things that you mentioned about your team are really important. I know that, especially in these last two years, I could not have got through these years without my work with the LIME Team, I think. I know about their children, and they know about my children, and I know about Coco the dog. And that has sustained me, and their care has sustained me throughout this period. And I think if I don't say that and don't value that, then somehow it doesn't get noticed. It doesn't get the applause that it should get, because it's not actually a win. It's just how our lives are lived.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

Yes and it actually brings it back to what a meaningful journey or career is. And maybe not the award-winning accolades, but it's actually what brings us joy and I think what makes us better at what we do. Before I open to the audience to ask a question, I wanted to just ask, with looking back now and what's been an incredible journey for you as a clinician and an educator, what do you think? And you've touched on this a little bit now, but what do you think are the key ingredients to knowing that it is a meaningful career?

**LILON BANDLER**

I think it depends on who you are, but for me, personally, the idea of being of service has been really critical to the satisfaction that I get from working. The idea that, for example, I can go to a clinic and provide healthcare services to people who might otherwise not have access to them is hugely important to me to be able to give something that is helpful and meaningful to people is, for me, critical to any sort of career or life decisions. The idea that I would do it only to serve my own purposes is bizarre.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

I think a lot in the healthcare, in the medical research sector, it is ultimately for a greater good, or to serve a community, or to try and find medicines or therapies, or better ways of supporting our community and our people. So I think many of us find that really meaningful, and I think that's a wonderful part of our faculty and our faculty's values as well, actually. I'm going to now stop hogging your time and open up to the audience. So if anybody wants to ask a question of Lilon, you can either put your camera on and turn your mic off, so I know you're ready to ask, or use the Raise a Hand function if you'd prefer, or even type in the chat, 'cause I know sometimes people prefer to just pop a question in the chat for me to ask. So while our audience are thinking and getting up the courage to ask the burning question I'm sure that they would like to ask you, Lilon, I might just ask as well a little bit, I guess, about mentoring. And so I think it's critical that we have on those... We're trying to search for the meaning, and then we have those days where we detour and things don't go quite to plan, or we just develop a new passion or an area that we want to work more towards, and it could be leadership or other things. What's perhaps been the best mentoring advice you might have been given, and maybe it was at a time that you didn't actually realize you knew it?

**LILON BANDLER**

The best piece of advice I ever got was when my eldest daughter was first born. And it was that I would always be the best parent my child could have, and that I did not need to be perfect. And in fact that advice sustained me through some really challenging child-rearing times, but also sustains me through other things that I do, to recognize that perfection is not enough of a goal in and of itself and is, because we are human, unattainable. And to be self-forgiving was really a hugely helpful thing to say to someone who had children... I was 37 when I had my first child. I was used to being a competent professional already, and suddenly was thrust into an area that I had no understanding of. I'm an only child. I didn't know. It was long enough ago that I had to fold nappies, and I had to look it up in a book how to fold a nappy. So I knew nothing. And to shift from being someone who knew her field to someone who didn't, and to be told on did not need to be perfect and that I would still be a good parent, was something that really helped me think about all the other areas of my life that I've moved into as well.

**NATALIE HANNAN**

Yeah, important advice as a mother, and probably important advice for life in general. Lilon, thank you so much for joining us today and sharing with us your story, imperfect and real, and that's just the way it should be. And I hope that our audience has enjoyed today's inspiring story. And I look forward to bringing more incredible, inspiring stories in 2022. We'll be taking a break now over summer, but we will return in March next year. And I'll email an invitation out to our faculty, to all of you, to join us again in the new year. We'll say goodbye to you now. Thank you.