



MY LIFE AS A RESEARCHER, ACTIVIST, AND VOLUNTEER

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"Your reason and your passion are the rudder and the sails of your seafaring soul. If either your sails or your rudder be broken, you can but toss and drift, or else be held at a standstill in mid-seas"

Khalil Gibran, Lebanese poet (1883-1931)

INTRODUCTION

Born in Beirut, Lebanon, I work as a rheumatologist and epidemiologist in my home city. I did my medical and rheumatology training at Saint Joseph University (USJ) in Beirut, one of the oldest academic institutions in the region, founded in 1875. I completed my training in France, as most students from my university do, starting with a fellowship at the Lyon-Sud University Hospital in Lyon. Once I completed my rheumatology training in 2005, I had the opportunity to do a master's degree in Public Health (MPH) at Paris XI University. I was tempted by research, and it felt like the right thing to do, even after finishing my rheumatology specialty. This MPH opened the way for my PhD in Public Health, also in Paris, on mortality in chronic rheumatic diseases. In parallel, I obtained several bursaries to participate in EULAR courses around Europe, allowing me to meet outstanding teachers and colleagues. I find traveling a unique opportunity to enrich my professional experience and open my mind to new cultures and ideas. As a young rheumatologist, I was the first EMEUNET representative in Lebanon. Even earlier in my career, I volunteered with some of my colleagues from the "USJ without borders"

group to care for the sick at Mother Theresa's Missionaries of Charity center in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. This experience was an eye-opener about health inequities around the world.

This journey of my early career shaped my professional interests later on. I am now a clinician, teacher, mentor, and researcher. Anchored in my country, and always seeking international collaborations, I am passionate about raising the academic profile of my country.

Today, I am a consultant rheumatologist at Hotel-Dieu de France Hospital, one of the major university hospitals in Lebanon, and a teacher at different faculties of Saint Joseph University. I am the president of the ARCH, the research group of the Arab League of Associations of Rheumatology (ArLAR), the president-elect of the Lebanese Society of Rheumatology, a member of the Lebanese Society of Epidemiology, French Society of Rheumatology (SFR), European Alliance for Rheumatology Associations (EULAR), the EULAR education committee, Assessment of Spondyloarthritis international Society (ASAS), and a fellow of the Royal College of Physicians of London. I am a member of the medical thesis committee in USJ, and I have mentored about 50 theses in medicine, pharmacy, nutrition, nursing, and road safety management, and chaired over 80 theses defenses. I also serve as a social media ambassador for multiple academic institutions and journals, including the American College for

Rheumatology and the Annals of the Rheumatic Diseases.

MY CLINICAL CAREER

I had the privilege to do my rheumatology training with a remarkable mentor and role model, Professor Hassane Awada, who is one of the best clinicians I have ever met. I learned the thoroughness of clinical research with my MPH and PhD mentor in France, Professor Joël Coste. For four years, I worked on population mortality data for France from 1968 to 2004, a database of 20 million death certificates spanning four decades, a tremendous learning opportunity and a humbling experience.

Back in Lebanon in 2006, I was swiftly offered the role of the principal investigator of several international clinical trials led by major pharmaceutical companies, which added greatly to my international research experience.

At that point, I realized the scarcity of epidemiological data from our region. So, I started by writing reviews about some specificities in the region, like the lower HLA-B27 prevalence compared to Western countries. These reviews got me more deeply into the spondyloarthritis field.

In 2015, I met with Professor Xenofon Baraliakos while we were both giving lectures in Lebanon, and he invited me to participate in a collaborative German-Lebanese investigator-initiated study. This study, as well as the incredible mentorship, generosity, and team spirit of Professor Baraliakos, was, for me, a turning point for international collaborations. It was also the driver of my enrolment as an ASAS member, where I had the chance to collaborate and work under the guidance of some of the best methodologists of our time, Professor Désirée van der Heijde and Professor Maxime Dougados.

Around the same time, the door opened for regional collaborations with an invitation by Professor Thurayya Arayssi to participate in the regional adoption of international guidelines, which was the first opportunity for Arab collaboration. Soon after, the election of Dr. Basel Masri as President of ArLAR launched a new era for Arab collaboration in research, as he was a keen advocate for teamwork. In 2021, I was among the founding members of the ARCH and have been leading research for the ArLAR in the Arab region ever since. In addition to local research, the ARCH has also been playing the role of a connecting piece between Arab and international research.

More recently, since the COVID-19 pandemic, I joined the international COVAD team, led by Professor Rohit

Aggarwal and Dr Latika Gupta, and have been participating in one of the largest-scale contemporary epidemiologic studies, including renowned international researchers and more than 20,000 patients and controls worldwide.

Despite many responsibilities, I still try to spare some time to continue learning new skills, like musculoskeletal ultrasound. Since this was not part of my formal rheumatology training, I resorted to online and face-to-face EULAR courses to perfect my ultrasound skills and implemented them in my clinic. I also developed my pediatric rheumatology competencies with the help of international courses and conferences, driven by the lack of specialists in that field in my country.

MY VIEWS ON RESEARCH AND CLINICAL PRACTICE IN A RESOURCE-LIMITED ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

In my work in Lebanon and the Arab region, I have faced many obstacles to research, such as the scarcity of basic epidemiological data, lack of funding, and of research time, to mention only a few.

Being a positive person and supported by a wonderful team of equally passionate researchers, I have opted to turn these obstacles into opportunities. With a dynamic core team formed by Dr Ihsane Hmamouchi, Dr Lina El Kibbi, Dr Nizar Abdullateef, and others (apologies for not naming everyone), we decided that having a shortage of data also meant having the possibility of conducting more studies to answer pending research questions. Therefore, the studies conducted under the ArLAR and the ARCH addressed the daily unmet needs of rheumatologists and patients in the region.

We created educational materials in Arabic to empower patients with rheumatoid arthritis and other rheumatic diseases to understand their diseases and assess their disease activity. During the COVID-19 pandemic, we conducted awareness campaigns and identified the impact of the pandemic on patients and rheumatologists. We published regional data in top rheumatology journals about the acceptability of the COVID-19 vaccine among patients and healthcare providers, trying to identify and overcome the obstacles to vaccination. We also published the ArLAR best practice guidelines for telehealth in rheumatology, arising from a actual need in our countries. More recently, we have been working on the optimal referral strategies for inflammatory rheumatic diseases in an attempt to raise awareness and reduce the diagnostic delay in our countries. We also took an interest in studying the unmet workforce needs in the ArLAR countries, burnout in our rheumatologists and

rheumatology fellows, and concordance between patients' and physicians' evaluation of disease activity.

In Lebanon, we also conducted a study to assess the impact of an unprecedented economic crisis on the persistence of treatment in chronic inflammatory rheumatic diseases, seeking to highlight this problem and find solutions to this issue.

Many issues still need to be addressed, and many obstacles remain, but I strongly advocate, "It's better to light a candle than to curse the darkness."

MY MESSAGES TO RESEARCHERS WHO IMPLEMENT EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACHES TO TREAT DISEASES, EDUCATE NEW GENERATIONS OF MEDICS, AND PRACTICE

A friend asked me recently: "How do you remain calm and in control when there is much to do and so much going on?" My intuitive answer was: "I do not do anything on purpose; it's who I am." But my friend replied, skeptical: "There must be some skills and tips that you could share with others!" So, I made up my mind to become more self-conscious about these skills and

tips, and I share the main messages I have learned so far.

Firstly, be organized. Each researcher needs to find their own way to do so. Personally, I never stop seeking knowledge, and I dedicate time to plan my week in advance and update my "To Do list" regularly, placing the items by order of priority and checking them once done (as a self-reward!). Also, I arrive at meetings with a clear agenda and leave with practical action points.

Secondly, do not be afraid to take the initiative. If you have a research idea, share it, test it, and if you find it worthy, proceed with it until fulfillment.

Thirdly, and most importantly, surround yourself with positive people, whether superiors, mentors, peers, students, or assistants. They will give you the motivation to move forward and reach your potential.

Finally, love what you do or do not do it; passion is the key. "Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life" (Confucius).

Figure 1. The AUTODAS research team during the ArLAR meeting in Oman, 2018. Nelly Ziade is sitting, the 3rd from the right



МЕНІҢ ЗЕРТТЕУШІ, БЕЛСЕНДІ ЖӘНЕ ЕРІКТІ РЕТІНДЕГІ ЖОЛЫМ

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