As an associate research scientist in Alan Tall’s group at Columbia University, New York, Marit Westerterp’s research has been focused on atherosclerosis and the molecular mechanisms of cholesterol efflux and transport[1–3]—a subject she will continue to pursue in her upcoming role as associate professor at the University of Groningen in the Netherlands.

Circulation Research caught up with Westerterp during her busy transition period and discovered that although this young researcher is a little reserved when talking about her personal life, she is forthcoming and enlightening on the subjects of research and career. In fact, she stresses how important conversations with colleagues are for success in one’s scientific life.

Communicating with fellow scientists, Westerterp says, has helped her to cope with tough times, to find new career opportunities, and to expand her research in new directions. And she now fosters such communications and exchanges of ideas in others through her work for the Netherland America Foundation, which promotes cultural and student exchanges between the 2 countries.

In her conversation with Circulation Research, Westerterp did share a few personal details. For instance, she spoke of growing up in the Netherlands, of being a keen violinist, and of the fact that both her mother and father are themselves research biologists.

**Did You Always Want to Follow in Your Parent’s Footsteps?**
No. Not really. I mean my parents always stimulated me, but it was not that I already knew at a very young age that I wanted to be a scientist. I had a lot of other creative interests. I was interested in arts and architecture.

But at school, I was always interested in chemistry and scientific topics, so I knew I wanted to do something in that direction.

**What Drives Your Interest in Science?**
I just have an interest in solving complex problems and in performing experiments to do so.

**What Subject Did You Choose at University?**
I chose to study biopharmaceutical sciences, which is actually a lot of chemistry. Then in my fourth year, I chose to do my Masters on lipid metabolism and atherosclerosis with Patrick Rensen, a very enthusiastic scientist.

During my Masters, I did a four-month internship at the pharmaceutical company Roche in Basel, Switzerland. That experience gave me a great impression of research in a pharmaceutical company. I liked being in an international environment and discussing my research with the other scientists.

After that, I went back to the Netherlands to take up my PhD with Patrick Rensen and Louis Havekes. The nice thing about doing a PhD in the Netherlands is that the students are always very much encouraged to present their work at conferences. This is great not only for the experience of presenting, but also for the opportunity to network and meet other scientists.

**Did the Networking Help You?**
Yes absolutely. I came to the United States for a Gordon conference on lipid metabolism in the second year of my PhD, and I went a further two times to these conferences during my PhD.

The Gordon conferences are great because they are small—only about 100 people—so you really can talk to everybody. People are very approachable. At the Gordon conference I attended in 2006, for example, I met Alan Tall. He has been in the field of atherosclerosis and lipid metabolism for a really long time and is a really big name. After talking to me, he invited me for an interview in his laboratory, and a year later, once I had finished my PhD, I joined his group.
Did You Have Any Trepidation About Coming to the United States?

No not really. It doesn’t actually feel that far away from the Netherlands. I traveled home quite often for friends’ weddings and so on and had a lot of friends and family visiting me.

Also, when I came here, I always knew I wanted to return to the Netherlands one day.

And Now You Are! What Has Been the Hardest Thing About Making the Transition?

The hardest thing is obtaining the funding and the position. Of course, they go together. Also, for me, having been away from the Netherlands for a long while, it was hard to know exactly how things worked in Europe. You get used to the US system. The longer you stay in one country the harder it is to come back.

So at some point I really actively started to look for positions and possibilities in Europe. I started to attend some conferences in Europe again and went to some lectures to give me the chance to talk to people and tell them I was planning to return.

The first time I applied for a Vidi grant (for innovative research) from the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research to return to the Netherlands, like many others who apply for such a prestigious grant, it was not funded. I was very disappointed.

Fortunately, I got the grant a year later.

How Do You Pick Yourself Up From Those Sorts of Disappointments?

What helps me is to talk to a lot of people around me and ask them for advice. I have always liked the environment at Columbia that. I’ve also always talked to my mentor. I think during my time here at Columbia I’ve been very fortunate to be surrounded by such great people. We’ve been very good at giving each other feedback, talking about things, thinking about how we can do better.

I think it is very important to be in a supportive environment.

Have There Been Other Difficult Times in Your Career?

To begin with, making the transition from the Netherlands to the United States was not so easy. It was a new laboratory, and the whole way of working was different. That was a little bit challenging.

I had just gotten my PhD, had been awarded my first grant, and had a paper in Circulation. I felt all these amazing things were happening but then came to a new environment and felt that there was so much stuff I didn’t know, techniques I didn’t know. There was so much to learn, and it was a bit overwhelming. The pace of work was really fast, and people would get their results really quickly. I would say it definitely took me a couple of years to get used to that.

Eventually, the postdoc was very successful, but it took time to start everything and get going. For example, when I arrived, we made a new mouse model, which was great, but I think we got the first papers out of that four or five years later. So there was a transition period of a few years where I was a little less productive than I had been before, which was new to me.

How Did You Get Through That Tough Period?

Well of course you’re not the only one, there are lots of new people coming to Columbia all the time. And the colleagues in the laboratory were really nice. They were really supportive, which was great. I could discuss my scientific ideas and challenges with them.

Also, New York is a really fun city; I very quickly found an orchestra here to play with, so there were fun things to do outside of work.

In Those Tough Times, Did You Ever Think About Leaving Academia For, Say, Industry?

No. I knew from other people that these things happen, and that getting a paper rejected or a grant not funded is not the end of the world, there are so many other opportunities.

I think you have to keep in mind, as a scientist, that you always go through times where things go well and other times where things go less well. That’s just the nature of the job.

So, What Have Been Your High Points?

There have been several. For instance, getting the Circulation paper published when I was a PhD student—that was really amazing. Another high point was when I got a competitive grant to be a postdoc in the United States. Then when the first papers started to be published during my postdoc that was also great because it opened up new opportunities for applying for grants.

Then, getting my position at Groningen, where I obtained a Rosalind Franklin Fellowship, and getting the Vidi grant from the Netherlands Organization of Sciences to start my own laboratory are both very exciting. I will start interviewing prospective PhD candidates next week.

What Are the Keys to Your Success?

Well that’s hard to say, as so many things in this career—whether you move on or not—depend on luck. You need to be lucky to get the paper published in a good journal, or to get the grant funded.

One key thing, is that I do always keep going, even when things aren’t going well. Being in a supportive environment has really helped me with that.

What Advice Do You Have for Young Scientists?

Be curious. Be persistent. And, if you are having a problem, then start looking for people who can help you. They may have a certain tool for you, or a certain model they can share.

Also, if you are looking to make a career step—to become a postdoc, a lab head, or whatever—go to conferences, make yourself heard, and let people know you are looking for a new opportunity. The people you meet can really help you, but you need to get out there and find them.

References


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