

# A Lifelong Balancing Act

*Dr Anette S Jacobsen*

**“There is no occupation concerned with the management of social affairs which belongs either to women or to men, as such... and every occupation is open to both.”**

– Plato, *The Republic*, about 390 BC

To call me a Viking with “wanderlust” would sum it up – a fairly fearless female who can’t sit still. I came to Singapore in 1985, having travelled for almost ten years prior. I had no idea then that I would enjoy motherhood and a paediatric surgical career. It all happened in a sort of continued blur during my first five years here. Four kids and two postgraduate exams later, I decided that paediatric surgery would be the ultimate challenge. Earlier on in my life, I had really no idea I loved children



*A welcome break from work – skiing in Norway with daughter Anne Marie.*



*Dr Jacobsen and her cherubic nephew.*

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so much. Once in Medicine, I always knew I had to be a surgeon rather than a physician, and was quite prepared to put in the extra effort. For me, paediatric surgery has all the requirements of a perfect job with accompanying job satisfaction – and continued challenges.

None of my achievements would have been possible without the continued support from my family. My husband and best friend, Mark, is a very hands-on dad, and a rare one who supported my decision to go away for one year of further training, leaving him alone at home with four children. I think in the end, it brought us closer together, but to date, this must have been the most difficult time in our married life. The kids did not seem to mind so much that mum was away, but our phone bills were substantial, and I was caught crying in the hospital in the UK on a few occasions – one such episode was when my son had fallen and broken his elbow.

**“Confucius said: ‘In dealing with the world, there are no definite rules as to how things should be done. A gentleman simply does things according to the actual situation.’”**

– Analects of Confucius

Once back in Singapore, I could enjoy work as a specialist, and another baby. One of my surgical bosses during my training days told me he did not mind me personally, but would not let me work in his unit again as I was always pregnant. Still, pursuing a surgical career in Singapore, I have generally not met with any discrimination. The choices and opportunities have been fairly equally distributed. However, it has been mostly hard work. I think having made a choice to do surgery, it would be unfair



*Operating at Angkor Hospital for Children in Cambodia.*

to burden colleagues with endless special requests and demands. In trying to balance surgery and family requirements, you have to build up a support system – with your colleagues and your family. This is extremely important when schooling starts. We lived in an extended family situation until very recently, and my kids and I have benefited tremendously from this.

With each career hurdle, I wait for more free time, which often is not forthcoming. But as my children grow older, I can do my own homework in the evenings rather than help with theirs. It is a continued balancing act between

self, work and family – generally, self will come last. However, I overcome this by “indulging” in some travelling. Regional surgical mission trips serve to recharge my batteries a few times every year.

I try to remind myself of my priorities regularly, and also why I chose to do medicine and surgery in particular. It was all for the patients. I think my career is most rewarding, and would never have chosen to do anything differently given another chance. ■

**“There is no cure for birth and death,  
save to enjoy the interval.”**

– George Santayana, 1863 - 1952