

Souha Kanj

Always fascinated by buildings, Souha Kanj wanted to be an architect and only sat the medicine entrance exam at Saint Joseph University in Beirut after pressure from her father. Now a professor of medicine at the American University of Beirut Medical Centre (AUBMC), Lebanon, Kanj told *The Lancet Infectious Diseases* that it is a decision she has never regretted.

There were many doctors in Kanj's family; however, she was most inspired by her uncle who exemplified the human side of being a doctor. Although she loved her medical studies, they took place in the 1980s in the midst of Lebanon's civil war. "I was risking my life to cross the city to go to my lectures", she recalls. "Things became so dangerous I had to finish my clinical training at AUBMC."

There, she would meet future husband Ala' Sharara, a fellow medical student, and face a difficult choice: to accompany him to a residency he had just accepted at Duke University (NC, USA) or to complete her studies in France. "I decided to follow my heart", she says. "I went to the USA even though I had not sat for the required exams." However, Sharara's performance and contacts at Duke helped to secure Kanj an interview with medicine programme director Ralph Corey. He took a chance by offering Kanj a 3-year residency and the gamble paid off: by the end of her third year, she was associate chief resident, leading to a fellowship in infectious diseases and a research position at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute.

"I enjoyed work related to infectious diseases the most, as there was a holistic approach to patient care", recalls Kanj. After the fellowship, she remained on the Duke faculty but felt she had to prove herself. "I felt I had to do something special to be alongside the big-name experts", she laughs. She created a special infectious diseases service for patients undergoing

transplantation. "I had fellows and faculty members doing rotations in this new service", she recalls. "This really gave me the confidence that I had what it takes to lead."

In 1998, Kanj and Sharara returned to Beirut. Kanj was appointed head of infectious diseases at the AUBMC. Her primary research focus was endocarditis and infections in immunocompromised patients including fungal infections but she "didn't have one particular pathogen or area I was interested in", she says. "It's hard to focus on just one disease in a developing country. I ended up pursuing research in many areas."

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Kanj's work on infection control and hand hygiene led to Lebanon signing the WHO hand hygiene pledge. She also published on a variety of topics, including hospital-acquired infections, the impact of *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* bacteraemia on outcomes of neutropenic patients with cancer, recalling surgical patients to detect surgical site infections, and varicella zoster virus infection of the central nervous system.

Her recent efforts have focused on local and international collaborations to study antimicrobial resistance among Gram-negative pathogens. She wrote the first ever review of antimicrobial resistance in the Arab nations, which was published in *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*. "We found that the epidemiology of antimicrobial resistance is different in countries, even those that are neighbouring", she explains. She is also a co-author on the PANORAMA study, published in this issue, showing that bloodstream infections with carbapenem-resistant Enterobacteriaceae increase length of hospital stay and mortality across low-income and middle-income countries.

Far-reaching collaborations are a staple of Kanj's work. She has collaborated with the European Society of Clinical Microbiology and Infectious Diseases and the International Society of Antimicrobial Chemotherapy and has worked with various WHO programmes such as the Research and Development Blueprint Annual Review of Priority Diseases, as well as the Global Infection Prevention and Control Network. In 2019, she was appointed to the International Advisory Board of *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*.

Kanj spends a huge proportion of her time training and working with her fellows, giving them one-on-one guidance. "I try to show them everything that I fit into my day", she laughs. "Inpatients, outpatients, the hospital rounds, and antimicrobial stewardship. If I do it, they do it!"

As for the future, Kanj hopes to work on microbiomes and phage therapy research, as well as continuing her efforts to address antimicrobial stewardship nationally, regionally, and globally. "We always jump at the chance to participate in international studies", she says.

Kanj loves to swim, and relax with her husband whose support has kept her focused and motivated. The couple also follow the lives of their three adult children, all of whom are in the USA, with one daughter currently doing infectious diseases research.

"Souha is an outstanding clinician, recognised regionally and globally as an authority in infectious diseases", says Corey, director of ID Research at the Duke Clinical Research Institute. "She is a great role model for female physicians but also for trainees and all infectious disease physicians in the Middle East and beyond. She is among the first women to lead an infectious disease division and an infection control programme in the Arab world."

Tony Kirby



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