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Russell Betney Hello and welcome to the University of Aberdeen podcast from the Rowett Institute. It's my great pleasure to introduce Professor Alexandra Johnstone, whose research of the Rowett has led to many key findings in appetite control. Alex also has a passion for public engagement and has given talks busting myths on dieting. Professor Alexandra Johnstone, welcome.

Professor Alex Johnstone Hello, Russ, thank you for the invitation to speak today.

Russell Betney Can you tell us when and why you first became interested in science?

Professor Alex Johnstone So yeah, I decided that I wanted to do a Masters degree in nutrition and that was way back in about 1993, and at that time my plans weren't really around research, but I had such a positive experience in working as a student at the Rowett institute during that time, then that really ignited my passion for research and really I was kind of mind blown to what the opportunities were for asking questions and then using human study protocols to answer those questions. And really that completely changed my plans and I have not left science since.

Russell Betney That's really interesting. Alex, thank you. You have given us some background on where you come from. I wonder if you could describe what kind of scientist you are now?

Professor Alex Johnstone So now I'm lucky enough to lead a team and I was awarded my 25 year work award for working within the University of Aberdeen. And of course, all that time has been spent at the Rowett Institute and my work is as a nutrition scientist and I'm also a registered UK nutritionist. So my work covers the broad remit of diet and health and I'm really interested in eating as a form of behaviour and how we can use dietary components to modulate the appetite response, which is really how hungry or how full we feel.

Russell Betney So, leading on from that, what are you currently researching and what do you think your future research will hold?

Professor Alex Johnstone [So, my current research interest is very much around looking at how not just what we eat and how that influences our body weight and health, but also looking at now when we eat. And that has been sparked by a Medical Research Council grant to look at a new topic, which is chrononutrition, which is chrono meaning time and nutrition, obviously referring to what we eat. So really what we're doing is looking at the evidence to consider whether the time that we eat the main meal of the day, whether it's morning or evening, how that impacts on energy balance, on body weight.

Russell Betney That's really interesting, Alex. So as well as what we eat, it is also important when we eat in terms of the calories we consume. What else do you do in your role? Do you help teach courses? Do you run seminars?

Professor Alex Johnstone So within my role most of my time is spent on research activities, but I do lead up some online teaching, which I really enjoy. In particular, one courses that's been highly successful was that I launched the first free online MOOC Massive Open Learning Course with FutureLearn, which is on nutrition and wellbeing, and

that has had global reach across the ages. And it's really nice when I meet people at conferences that they tell me they've done the course and they really enjoyed it. So really, I'm quite passionate that I would like to share my science with a range of stakeholders and that can be through public engagement and also working with other health care providers, policy and the food sector.

Russell Betney It sounds like you are really busy. What do you think your major career milestones have been? Have there been any highlights or perhaps any obstacles that you have had to overcome?

Professor Alex Johnstone That's a great question. And I when was thinking about today's interview and I was able to reflect that my line managers have always been men. Now, that's interesting because I would say that at the time I started, there was more men working than women. Of course that's changed now with a number of female professors like myself in post, but really what I would say is that I feel I've been fully supported through the different stages of my career, and I found that mentoring in particular, whether it's internally or indeed externally with a woman, has given me that extra drive when I have needed it to get support to achieve my both personal goals and professional goals. And I think it's about having a team of people around you that are happy to support you, because, of course, science, I would say, is 99 percent hard graft and then you get one percent of the time that is really exciting and you feel quite elated when you get that grant application awarded. But actually, behind that is huge team effort to prepare, that grant application just as an example. So I feel that I've got a really great team ethos working at the Rowett and that allows me to achieve my goals. And I just want to acknowledge people like Claire Fyfe, who's my research assistant, and I wouldn't be nearly as productive if I didn't have clear working alongside me on the different projects.

Russell Betney You mentioned being a mentor, I imagine that gives you the opportunity to share your knowledge and wisdom with students and postdoctoral scientists. Leading on from that, do you have any advice for anyone who is interested in a career in science, research or academia?

Professor Alex Johnstone So I would really encourage women to think about a career in science, and I accept that it's not always easy and I accept under current conditions with COVID pandemic and lockdown that can feel quite isolating, because the job opportunities and training opportunities to do face to face work are somewhat limited. But that said, actually I've taken on more mentees during this period of lockdown. So, really, I would encourage a young woman and men, of course, to look and seek out to find a mentor and somebody that you can connect with and somebody that can help you think through and plan how you're going to achieve your goals. And that can really make a difference in the short term to be able to focus and to be able to spend time on the right activities in order for you to progress.

Russell Betney That's excellent advice. Well, that brings us to the end of our podcast today. I hope it has given our listeners some food for thought and some insight into one of our distinguished scientists. It just remains for me to find Professor Alexandra Johnstone for joining us today.

Professor Alex Johnstone Thank you, Russ, for the invitation. It's been really nice to chat with you.

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