Early Career Journey: Dr Zandile Nare

Key Education

Qualifications

University of Edinburgh: PhD Target Based Drug Discovery
University of Edinburgh: MSc Drug Discovery and Translational Biology
University of Strathclyde: BSc (Hons.) Pharmacology with Industrial Placement

Key Skills

Drug discovery and translational biology
Biophysical characterisation
Assay development
Protein expression and purification
Science communication

Challenge

One of the main challenges I've faced is setting clear boundaries for myself. With so many interesting projects and opportunities available, it can be tempting to take on too much at once. I've learned that the work will always be there, so it's important to set realistic and achievable goals. I've also come to appreciate the value of asking for help when needed and being able to say no when necessary. These self-management skills are often underestimated but are essential for effective career development and personal wellbeing in the workplace. Recognising my own limits and prioritising my time have been crucial in maintaining both productivity and a healthy work-life balance.

My Advice

My advice to anyone considering a career in STEM is to prioritise collaboration and relationship building. Secondly, don't be afraid to step outside your comfort zone and try new things. Above all, stay curious and open-minded. The world of STEM is constantly evolving, and your willingness to learn and grow will be your greatest asset.

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Career Moves

What is your job now and what do you do each day?

I currently work as a Senior Scientist at Concept Life Sciences, a leading drug discovery Contract Research Organisation in the UK. My primary focus is within the Protein, Structure, and Biophysics team, but my background in phenotypic projects also allows me to collaborate across teams, particularly on cell-based assay development.

Each day is varied, but my core responsibilities include engaging with clients to understand their scientific challenges and designing tailored experimental plans to support their drug discovery goals. Once a project is underway, I manage all aspects of the study - from planning and executing experiments or delegating work within the team, to analysing data and presenting results to clients. I also provide scientific recommendations to help drive projects forward and ensure that our collaborative efforts continue to deliver value and innovation for our clients.

My role requires a combination of hands-on laboratory work, project management, and cross-functional teamwork, as well as strong communication skills to ensure client needs are met and project milestones are achieved efficiently.

How did you get into your current role and what have been your career moves?

My career has been driven by a deep curiosity to understand how drugs work. I started by studying Pharmacology at the University of Strathclyde, where I had the opportunity to complete my thesis project under the supervision of Dr. Stephanie Boomkamp in Professor Nigel Pyne's lab. At the time, they were spinning out Mironid – a biotech company focused on developing innovative therapeutics for patients with ADPKD and other rare diseases, which gave me my first real exposure to translational science and the biotech industry.

After my undergraduate studies, I was keen to pursue a PhD. While I managed to get a couple of interviews, I soon realised I wasn't competitive enough and needed to strengthen by academic profile, so I completed an MSc in Drug Discovery and Translational Biology at the University of Edinburgh. This degree, especially my thesis project on fragment-based drug discovery against phosphofructokinase for Chagas disease (American trypanosomiasis) in Professor Malcolm Walkinshaw's lab under the supervision of Dr Iain McNae, was significant in shaping the direction of my career. This experience was both eye-opening an inspiring, confirming my desire to pursue a PhD and ultimately a career in drug discovery. However, I couldn't find the right PhD project at the time, so I decided to gain some industry experience while continuing my search.

This led me to my next role as a Laboratory Technician in the Purification and Conjugation team at Abcam in Cambridge. I thoroughly enjoyed the work and the team, and it provided an excellent introduction to the life science industry. Then, when I least expected it, I found the perfect PhD project – a continuation of my MSc work under the supervision of Professor Achim Schnaufer and Professor Walkinshaw at the University of Edinburgh. My research focused on target-based small molecule drug discovery against RNA Editing Ligase 1 in African Trypanosomiasis (Sleeping Sickness) and the Leishmaniases.

Each of these experiences helped shape my expertise in protein expression, purification, and assay development. After my PhD, I was keen to explore a new avenue within drug discovery, so I joined Piramal Pharma as a Process Development Protein Scientist, working in the oncology antibody-drug conjugate space. This role gave me valuable insights into large-scale pharmaceutical development, but I soon realised that my passion lay in smaller-scale, R&D-driven environments, which led me to my current position at Concept Life Sciences.

Throughout my career, I've also enjoyed all forms of science communication. Alongside my scientific roles, I've pursued freelance work as a science writer and language editor, further fuelling my passion for making complex science accessible to a wider audience.

What does the future hold?

In the immediate future, I'm excited to contribute to the growth of our Protein and Structure business within Concept, leveraging and complementing our expanding Biophysical Sciences capabilities. It's inspiring to see how the integrative work we're doing across Protein, Structure, and Biophysics is already accelerating our clients' projects and delivering meaningful results.

Looking further ahead, I'm eager to deepen my expertise in structural biology techniques, specifically X-ray crystallography and Cryo-EM. I'm committed to continuous learning and development, both to enhance my own skill set and to help drive innovation within our team. Ultimately, I look forward to playing a key role in shaping the future direction of our business and supporting our clients in achieving their scientific goals.