

# FOCUS AND FRANK: A CONVERSATION WITH SEAN MACKEY

*Sean Mackey, PhD, is the Chief of the Division of Pain Medicine and Redlich Professor of Anesthesiology, Perioperative and Pain Medicine, Neurosciences and Neurology at Stanford University, USA. His full profile can be viewed [here](#), or you can follow him on Twitter @[DrSeanMackey](#). His research interests include functional neuroimaging of pain, the neural plasticity contributing to chronic pain, and the development and implementation of an open-source learning healthcare system [CHOIR](#), used for the measurement and tracking of chronic pain outcomes. Mackey spoke with Lincoln Tracy, a research fellow from Monash University, Australia, at the 2019 Australian Pain Society Annual Scientific Meeting, which took place April 7-10, 2019, on the Gold Coast, Australia. Below is an edited transcript of their conversation.*



## **What are some important things you try to teach the early career researchers that you work with?**

The first thing we learn from picking up a PhD is the f-word: focus. We must always remember focus because it is very easy to get pulled in multiple directions. You may spend a lot of energy and end up with many publications and projects. But when reviewers are looking at you for that next career development grant, they are looking for a clear thematic path from your work. They

want to say, “Lincoln, we can see who you are—and where you are going.”

What I try to do with the postdocs I work with is plan a thematic career trajectory where they are developing their own independent research projects—but at the same time getting involved in analysing existing data sets and doing secondary analyses to generate additional peer-review publications. I think it’s very important at this early stage of your career to be getting as many

first author positions as you can. However, at the same time, there is value in demonstrating collaboration and collegiality—that you can be a good team player and a get involved with other people’s projects. It’s always a balance between being a good citizen and being *too* good a citizen. I don’t think there’s any hard and fast rule in that—it’s just about portioning your time and keeping your eye on the ball. Where do you see yourself going, and how are you going to move the ball there?

**Do the secondary analyses of existing data and collaborative involvement in other people’s projects need to be related to your thematic path, or is there some flexibility on this?**

I don’t think there’s any absolutes to that. I really think it depends on whose lab you end up in and what resources are available to you. I feel I’m extremely lucky I can provide a range of resources and opportunities to the early career researchers I work with. This means I can give my post docs more flexibility when they try and figure out what they are all about—and what focus they want to take with their research.

For example, I’m working with an Israeli post doc who is very interested in the intersection between anger and pain, so we’re focusing on emotion regulation. Another post doc is focusing on acupuncture. Now, my knowledge of acupuncture could fill a thimble—but she has been very effective in moving that forward and has also been involved in some of the secondary analysis of data we have in the clinic through the Collaborative Health Outcomes Information Registry ([CHOIR](#)) relating to acupuncture. My role with her is to provide higher level career mentoring to help navigate the turbulent waters of an academic path.

If you have a particular set of skills that provide added value to other people’s projects, then you can readily get involved with these and end up as a middle author on publications, which further establishes your CV. A recent post doc of mine, [Drew Sturgeon](#)—who is now on faculty at the University of Washington—came in with wonderful

analytical skills around structural equation modelling. He enjoyed data analysis, and was able to keep his own projects moving forward but also be involved with half a dozen of other people’s projects. By the time he finished his post doc at Stanford he had 24 publications. It’s all about finding where your skills can add value to other people’s projects without being *too* helpful. If you’re too helpful you feel like you have worked your ass off doing all these projects and you have a lot of middle author papers, but people will just wonder “what are *you* all about?”

**Do you have a favourite song, or a piece of music that you enjoy?**

Well, I have my grant writing music, which is [Sinatra](#). For reasons unclear to me, when I put Frank Sinatra on it immediately puts my brain into a mode where I tend to focus more, and I think about writing grants and papers. It might have something to do with my father listening to Sinatra songs as I was growing up, but I’m not sure. I can’t write as well with some of the more adult contemporary, pop, and rock music. I find it’s the type of music where it’s in the background—it’s not attentionally demanding—but it somehow puts my brain into this mode where it is comfortable. I find it fascinating how music can either lend to creativity or can be a distraction depending on the individual, the music, and the situation. But what’s really interesting is that I can put on Michael Buble—[who sings the Sinatra songs](#)—but I don’t write as well. I find it more attentionally demanding. The key is to find your own environment where you are most productive. Experiment and tweak it until it works well for you.

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