



Spotlighting Women in STEM: Ronda Greaves, PhD

As part of Agilent's Women in STEM series, we're focusing on the experiences and career trajectory of our inspiring female researchers and collaborators.

Dr. Ronda Greaves is the deputy head of biochemical genetics at Victorian Clinical Genetics Services, Australia. Responsible for the screening of up to 80,000 babies a year for all manner of conditions, Ronda can be considered a lifesaver! Having experienced the challenges women face when flexibility isn't prioritized by employers, Ronda is a passionate advocate for more accommodating workplace practices and gender quotas.

Driving excellence in pediatric testing

With a strong belief that you should always do what you love, and not just what pays the bills, Ronda has followed her passion for pediatric testing throughout the course of her academic studies and career. Initially spending time as a medical scientist in a pediatric biochemistry lab, then moving to academia, Ronda realized her passion lay with the impact her work makes on the patients themselves—the children and babies.

After completing a PhD in pediatric chemistry, she went on to work in a pediatric laboratory, running samples taken from babies to determine key health markers. Ronda's work and expertise in steroid analysis has been crucial to identifying potentially life-threatening or life-altering conditions in newborns. The tests run in her lab often act as the first warning sign that an infant has a serious issue that needs addressing, informing a doctor's approach to patient care. When abnormal results are detected by Ronda's team, they can quickly contact a doctor to flag the need for urgent attention.

One in 1,000 babies screened by the program are likely to be referred for a clinical follow-up, ultimately helping to reduce the number of deaths from serious conditions, such as congenital adrenal hyperplasia (CAH), maple syrup urine disease (MSUD), and medium-chain acyl-CoA dehydrogenase deficiency (MCADD).



"Big gender disparities in the workplace shouldn't exist anymore. A quota system for female employment in STEM institutions could go a long way to resolving this. Hopefully those quotas wouldn't need to be there forever, but to promote change, I think it's really important."

Ronda Greaves, PhD
Deputy head of biochemical genetics
Victorian Clinical Genetics Services

Navigating the world of STEM as a woman

At the start of her career, Ronda was often recognized by senior management for the high quality of her work. As the parent of a child with additional childhood medical needs, Ronda faced many challenges in balancing motherhood and day-to-day caring responsibilities with her career. She often felt unsupported by her (then) employer. The world is improving, and now Ronda feels she has a great balance in terms of both flexibility and support.

With the support of fantastic mentors—both male and female—she has recognized her full potential and value. For Ronda, these relationships are important for women as they help to instill a sense of confidence.

Envisioning change

Ronda believes that the industry would benefit from a quota system where there is a significant disparity in the representation of women. Ronda is currently vice president of her local biochemistry group. Through her experience in working on several committees, she feels that many people can have an unconscious bias, and

she is passionate about encouraging gender balance for invited speakers, committee representation, and awards. Recent research has shown that mothers and/or pregnant women are victim of a 'maternal wall bias' whereby their colleagues can view them as less committed or competent.¹ Ronda believes that until we as a community collectively are able to shift our thinking, a quota system can help promote change and bring a more balanced representation between genders.

She hopes that work environments continue to become more accepting of flexible schedules. Not only does this help with productivity, but it supports women who are also mothers and carers in balancing their careers and family lives. It is particularly tough for women with children that have neurodevelopment disorders, such as autism. They work up to seven hours less a week and are six percent less likely to be employedⁱⁱ, and they are often forced to stop working altogether to care for their young family and return later in life to their careers. These days, however, there is a much greater support network for parents and carers of dependents with additional needs.

Ronda's Top Tips

- Pursue your passions. Stay with it and be resilient.
- Support your own personal development by doing short courses and networking to build on your interpersonal skills outside of the work environment.
- Be supportive of women around you—treat them with understanding and empathy.
- Don't be shy about making your needs clear. You're bringing value to your team and don't be afraid to say so!
- If you notice a gender imbalance, don't be afraid to call it out.

¹ <https://www.science.org/content/article/working-mothers-face-wall-bias-there-are-ways-push-back>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.verywellhealth.com/should-i-quit-my-job-to-help-my-autistic-child-259967>