The term Harden Conference will be well known to many Biochemical Society members and others in the field of Biochemistry. In the Society Conference Office, the phrase carries a certain prestige; Hardens are our flagship scientific meetings, fully residential and with a programme covering new, exciting research. Of course, all of our events have the latter, but previous delegates of Harden Conferences will no doubt remark on the superb opportunity for open discussion and scientific interchange that a Harden presents, thanks to a programme with ample time for networking, the closed, retreat style and the unpublished nature of abstracts and proceedings.

Harden Conferences have taken place twice annually since 1969, meaning that 2019 marks forty years of the initiative. The concept has aged well; 2018’s Hardens were tremendous successes, looking at autophagy and single-cell bacteriology, and the 85th Harden Conference will see delegates discussing dynamic membrane complexes in Germany next September. Yet, as with all things, a fresh coat of paint is always welcome, which is why the Harden Conference is being rebranded and has a new logo that highlights the important role the Harden Conferences play in the activities of the Biochemical Society.

This is no hyperbole; The 83rd Harden Conference was the best conference I’ve ever attended (let alone presented at). About 80% of the references in my PhD cite an attendee from the 83rd Harden Conference. I had the opportunity to speak directly to all other presenters and delegates, and the calibre of science was so high that it’s already inspired several new research projects in our lab.

Attendee, 83rd Harden
Local Ambassador – Gus Amour

I joined GlaxoSmithKline (GSK) 18 years ago as a biochemist specialising in enzymology, evaluating the effects of enzyme inhibitors in various forms of assay (biochemical, cellular, tissues, complex in vitro models). I lead projects, advising and working on all aspects concerning enzyme targets in the Respiratory R&D division. I have also recently been appointed as a member of the GSK Fellowship programme, which is designed to motivate GSK researchers to follow a scientific career path that enables them to express their passion for and excellence in science. This is a new and exciting opportunity which I look forward to as it encourages me to explore another passion – engaging with the wider scientific community such as the Biochemical Society.

What motivated you to become a scientist?
I was very much the odd one out in my family, being drawn towards science whilst my parents and six siblings were all non-scientists. Early on at school, I decided that I was going to be a medical doctor; it seemed like a most respectable and rewarding career. However, soon after starting medical school in Paris, I realised I had overestimated my capacity to deal with the realities of the human body. I thus switched to a biology degree in the same university. This immediately captured my interest, so much so that I went on to complete a PhD in Biochemistry. I am happy that at GSK I can now fulfil my ambition of improving the health of patients, albeit not in quite the way I had initially envisaged.

What inspires you about molecular bioscience?
In an odd way, what inspires me most about molecular biosciences are the challenges we face and the victories we have, both large and small, in the face of these. Some recent technological advancements like cryo-electron microscopy or gene editing help further our understanding of how life works, but the more we learn, the more we realize how little we know. It amazes me how so many great medicines have been discovered in the past century with the human body. I thus switched to a biology degree in the same university. This immediately captured my interest, so much so that I went on to complete a PhD in Biochemistry. I am happy that at GSK I can now fulfil my ambition of improving the health of patients, albeit not in quite the way I had initially envisaged.

What’s been the greatest challenge in your career so far?
After completing my PhD, I undertook a three-year post-doctoral placement in Prof. Gillian Murphy’s group focusing on metalloproteinases. I enjoyed the possibilities of becoming an expert in a particular field of biology. Being surrounded by other scientists who share the same interest as well as ideas is a great way to quickly become skilled in a particular area. The transition from this focused environment to industry was a big challenge for me initially. In industry, scientists often work across multiple projects and learn completely new skill sets according to the demands of the business. Over the years, I have developed a broad view of all the scientific disciplines involved in discovering potential drugs such as the PI3K-delta inhibitor for respiratory indications, which I have been working on for ten years now. I have become expert in several of these disciplines, but at the expense of not being able to fully immerse myself and become a world expert in a specific area of biology, which a career in academia would allow. However, to help fill our knowledge gaps in industry, we develop relationships with academic experts, and this is one of the parts of my work I enjoy the most: interacting and collaborating with external experts.

What is your advice for someone who would like to pursue a career in molecular bioscience?
My advice would be to become comfortable analysing and interpreting big data, which is becoming increasingly less challenging to generate with new techniques such as single cell transcriptomics. Acquiring bioinformatics skills and learning a coding language like Python will undoubtedly help anyone contemplating a future career in molecular bioscience and will make them attractive to the industry sector. My colleagues in computational biology recommend http://bioconductor.org/ as a useful resource for bioinformatics tools such as ‘R’.

What do you do in your spare time?
Like most fathers, my weekend often consists of taxiing my two teenage boys and eleven-year-old daughter to various classes and events with their friends. Outside of this taxi job, I try to escape for long walks with our dog or for a round of golf. When injury-free, I also play squash and have taken up road-cycling. On holidays, we go back to France to ski in the winter or sunbathe in the summer.

Ambassadors are a key group of members that help us to raise awareness of the Biochemical Society, promote its activities, recruit new members and act as the Society’s point of contact at their institution. If you would like to get involved as an Ambassador, please contact: membership@biochemistry.org.