

Messages for Jabberwock, Mole and other contributors to Sticky Wicket column can be left at mole@biologists.com. Any correspondence may be published in forthcoming issues.



Post-stuck I – the pact

Here now, no more tears, okay? Sit down, and let Uncle Mole make it all better. There we go, there's a smile. Really, it's going to be okay. Blow your nose, and just rest for a bit. Better?

What I *really* want to say is, give me a frickin' break. I mean, get some *spine*. I say it and I say it, but you don't want to hear it: science is hard. It is not for the faint at heart, and it is most definitely not for wimps.

Here I am, succoring another post-doc who has spent the last eight years going nowhere, and suddenly feeling very upset about the whole thing. And being me, I want to be a nice guy and help, but really, what can I do about it?

In case you don't know (and of course you do) a 'post-doc' is somebody who has succeeded in obtaining an advanced

degree, and in particular, who has obtained such a degree in the sciences. I'm not entirely sure, but I don't think they have post-docs in the arts, or history, or, I don't know, central European literature. We're talking the sciences, and really, the biomedical sciences, in which post-doctoral fellows ('post-docs' for short) have PhDs, MDs, DVMs, VMDs, DDSs or BVDs. Okay, not the last one, but any of the others.

Because of the nature of the biomedical sciences, there are a growing number of post-docs who seem to be post-stuck. Stuck in the rut of trying to get out enough of sufficient importance that they can move on to the next career stage, and the clock keeps ticking with the prize just out of reach. No clear path forward, no way back, and nothing to do but more experiments. Post-stuck.

Now in some places, this isn't really a problem. In some places, where they drink

good wine and spend long periods of time discussing all manner of things in places that serve superb coffee, researchers come to a position at a very early stage, often pre-degree, prove their value, obtain said degree, maybe go off and study with someone else for a while, come back, and work until, hopefully, they get a job in the same place they started – making a life where their friends and family are and have always been, and that's rather nice. So they don't worry about this. But for most of us this was never an option, and we know that after getting our degrees we will be gypsies, traveling from lab to lab until we get a job somewhere, and then most likely traveling from job to job, often somewhere new. It's a wandering life, but that isn't a bad thing, as long as we realize that it's the way of things from the outset. So in places where they play baseball or cricket, and where they drink beer, the problem of the post-stucks is growing, and it might be useful to see why.

We (and in this case, by 'we' I mean 'you') go through college with a relatively simple set of rules – do these things and you will succeed, you will graduate. We (you) proceed to a graduate or medical training program, which of late has come to follow essentially the same rules – do these things and you will succeed and graduate. And then comes the post-doc, and the rules are simply gone: there is no set of things, simple or complex that, if done, will spell success. There's only success or not. If it comes, wonderful. But if not, you may be post-stuck. In the words of one of our philosophers (actually I don't know if we

can claim him as 'ours', but it's fun to do so), "Do, or do not. There is no try."

There is an emerging trend to create something like a post-doc 'contract' at many institutions. These are agreements between post-doc and mentor that include some good things, like mutual respect, responsibility, attention to training and the practice of good science. But often they also include things that are, to my eye, attempts to bring the same rule-based system to this level of training. Things like documented career plans, formal reviews and evaluations, and remedial education and/or retraining.

Sorry, I'll pass. Because even if I evaluate you every few weeks, even if we formulate and agree upon a set of specific goals and monitor your progress towards achieving them, even if we create a plan for your career development and follow it diligently, there is no guarantee that you'll get the job you want, or really, *any* job. The deal doesn't come with guarantees, only opportunities.

Sorry, that sounded harsh. The fact is, you can greatly improve your odds. Here's the deal I make with all the Mole-lets. I work very hard to foster a creative, interactive and critical environment in which to do science. I work hard to secure equipment, supplies and expertise to conduct the research we want to do. And I work extra hard to stay on top of the latest advances in the field, and provide opportunities for my trainees to do the same. Oh, and I stake out clear boundaries for the projects, mediating any overlap or disputes that may

arise. Otherwise, I leave them alone. In return, they take full responsibility for their work and its integrity, and they participate in lab activities, which include lab chores, journal club and critiquing each others' work (and presentations).

And guess what? We do pretty well. We work together on papers and presentations, and I help them prepare for any future research career they hope to make. Most of the ex-Mole-lets (the vast majority, really) have research programs of their own, or in a few cases have moved on to other rewarding careers. And yeah, there are lots of professors who list the Mole on their curricula vitae. I'm proud of them, so I get bragging rights.

And hopefully, nobody is post-stuck. Sure, some need longer than others to get it done. But in (almost) every case, I have the joy of seeing them catch fire, reach for the hard stuff and get it, and mature into real-life, independent scientists. And in return, each of them contributes to the lab and, yeah, to my career. I think it's a fair deal. Anyway, it's *the* deal. Take it or leave it.

I know not every lab is the same, and that doesn't make the other labs wrong or me right. But how do you avoid getting post-stuck? And if you *are* post-stuck, what do you do? We'll talk about these important questions next time. Stick around.

Mole

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