

An occasional column, in which Mole and other characters share their views on various aspects of life-science research. Messages for Mole can be sent to [mole@biologists.com](mailto:mole@biologists.com). Any correspondence may be published in forthcoming issues.



## The myth of having it all

Dear Uncle Mole,

Can you believe it? Your little mole-let is now Dr Molette! It's not so much that I feel different from day to day – although I think I've had a few moments where my furry feet didn't touch the ground, high-heels and all – but now the possibilities of what comes next are so very exciting. The sky's the limit, the world's my oyster and I can't wait to climb the ranks of the academic ladder.

There's only one small problem. And, Uncle Mole, like a pot of tea left to steep

for much too long, this is something that has been on my mind for a while now. Ever since I started in science, I've been hearing the enthusiastic spiel from The Powers-That-Be about the keys to success in science, research, teaching, mentoring, grant-writing, editing, academic leadership.... and on and on. The list of skills and accomplishments that my junior colleagues and I should aspire to master grows longer every day. And what's the latest addition to the lecture/workshop circuit? It's women in science, and the balancing act between work and family. To be honest with you, that's when I lost it. Now I'm supposed to continue this endless (and apparently effortless) metamorphosis

from naïve little mole-let into Super-PI and, it seems, Super-Parent to boot? Did someone do away with the 24-hour day when I wasn't looking?

I know, I know, I'm being melodramatic and it's not even Happy Hour yet. But truly, I do think this myth of having it all – and it *is* a myth, Uncle Mole – is one that has permeated the academic training environment from top to bottom. The unspoken sentiment is that we're supposed to be interested in everything, pursuing everything, and good at all of it, all of the time. It's not that I don't support this push for excellence. On the contrary, I feel exceedingly fortunate to be pursuing my education and life in science now, at a time when the many facets that shape a sparkling career are emphasized as part of the equation. The catch is that, if graduate school taught me anything, it's the importance of balance. And reaching for everything, all at once, is the fastest way I know to go from the baby steps of a nascent career-on-the-rise to the oblivion of mediocrity and burnout.

So forgive me for venting but, after much contemplation amidst the celebration of finishing my dissertation, I have come to a few fledgling conclusions about time management. And I'd greatly appreciate your sage perspective. Do you think these musings will serve me well in the long run?

First of all, this mole-let has observed that no one person can do it all, and do it well, all of the time. It's a function of simple arithmetic. There are a limited number of hours in the day, and no amount of scientific brilliance can manufacture more. Sure, there's that one remarkable person who makes us shake our heads in amazement, but what I've noticed is this: genius multi-taskers don't become that way by creating more time. No, they stay involved in their plethora of projects by being smart with the time that they have. The temptation is to pile more and more and more onto one's plate – and it's true that the opportunities do get juicier the further one climbs up the ladder – but the successful scientists who I'd like to emulate are the ones who know when to say 'yes' *and* when to say 'no'. There isn't a place in the lab for every graduate student who rotates, because mentoring a student the right way requires time. Not every request for a speaking engagement can be accepted, no matter how flattering

the offer might be. And, a collaboration might have to wait for the right time. It's only logical that, when new possibilities arise, something else has to give (or become much more efficient). But for some reason, that's not the culture that is most often fostered in the trenches; instead, there's this perception that the responsibilities can increase ad infinitum with no effects on quality. Yet, from my perspective as a newly independent mole-let, isn't quality the only thing that matters? The trick, it seems, is recognizing one's limits. But of course that requires acknowledging that such limits exist in the first place...

And this brings me to my second conclusion. The people who seem to make the most of their time are the ones who have the most clearly visible priorities. In a way this is so obvious that I don't know why I didn't think of it earlier. Maybe it's hardest – especially for a mole – to see those things that are right in front of our own nose? Yet, from the most senior of PIs who really are famous, to the most junior investigators just starting out, the thread of success seems to be anchored to a sense of purpose. I suppose that when you've invested a few moments in thinking about who you are and where you're headed, making decisions about how to spend your professional time is not such a big deal after all. In fact, from that perspective, I suppose the decisions about what does and doesn't fit into the big picture might even fall into place. Imagine that! So you know something, Uncle Mole? I think my project for the summer is going to be giving some serious thought to my priorities and vision for this next phase of my training. I suspect that I might see the dividends of a clearly articulated purpose sooner than I expect.

Finally, there's that whole sticky question of life and relationships beyond the lab. When it comes to negotiating this balance, all I can do is throw up my paws and say that I've been digging my personal life into a bit of a hole that I haven't figured a way out of yet. But the one thing I do know is that all of my colleagues that wanted a life on both sides of the lab have made their personal lives no less important than the building blocks of their career. Sometimes that meant having to commute for better schools. Or moving for a job that wasn't a first choice but was a compromise for two people's careers and happiness. The

bottom line is that anything worth doing – however we define that – requires effort and commitment and sometimes sacrifice. No one expects that a *Nature* paper is going to just happen without a substantial investment of time and energy. Isn't the same true in the realm of those non-scientific things to which we assign value? Minimal effort doesn't translate into life-changing reward. I'll be honest with you, Uncle Mole. I don't know how my life will turn out in the end (stay tuned for the drama). But I do believe that, although we all have the freedom to make choices and build a life that is solely and uniquely our own, I'm not going to buy into the fallacy that I can get something for nothing. Experiments with no thought behind them simply don't work.

So, there you have it. The latest musings from Molette...what do you think? I'll look forward to hearing from you. In the meantime, I'm off in search of some ice cream. Summer is here and the humidity is wreaking havoc with my hair!

Fondly yours,  
Molette

*Dear Dr Molette,*

*These are deeply important issues, and require deep thought (and lots of tea – although I don't actually drink tea when I drink 'tea', and hence the deep thought). So here are my superficial views on this very real problem of having it all.*

*There are definitely sacrifices, and while we all say we make them, it often falls on the X chromosome (the more you have, it seems, the more sacrifice is demanded). This is an inequity that pervades our rarefied culture, just as it pervades the culture at large, and some of it (all of it?) simply isn't right.*

*For me, it's about human resources. Not the HR department at your favourite institution, but real human resources, and this demands some basic reprogramming in our thinking. Leaving aside multiple X chromosomes for the moment, we can ask about this problem in a more general way. Do departments hire new assistant professors, for example, who may have four or five decades of life experience behind them? In my experience the answer is generally 'no' but the reasons are vague to me – is someone of a particular age less*

likely to produce first-rate work? Our experience suggests that this is perhaps the case (because we look at our hot young assistant professors and see how hard they work compared to Dr Fossil in the lab down the hall), but that is a misconception based on the established 'system'. The wisdom, such as it is, of this system also says that someone with added responsibilities (and here we return to the correlation of X's with responsibility) will not have the time to devote to scientific pursuit.

*Bullstuff.* (I invite you to substitute your favorite term here.) One of the best mole-lets I ever had the pleasure of working with joined our lab when I learned that she was being 'let go' from the lab next door due to a perfectly natural human condition – she was into her third trimester. When I invited her to join our lab, she was astonished. 'Why would you hire me when you know that I'll only be able to work for a month or two and then will be gone for many more months?' she asked. I told her, 'Because when you come back, you'll give it all you can, and I know that even distracted work from you is better than what an average

sort of mole-let can do.' She agreed, and we ultimately published a series of exciting papers, some of them in rather nice journals with shiny pages. She is now a research director at a major pharma, and doing very well, thank you.

We all know that, while Y chromosomes are represented in only 50% or less of most graduate programs, their frequency tends to increase as we move up the ranks of the academic lists (although not as much as once was). But we have to be careful here. In addition to reasons relating to those you've outlined, there is another. For anyone, letting oneself out of the treadmill is often viewed as 'dropping out', and we need a strong rationale for doing so. One rationale we tend to use is that we simply can't do it all, and we have to direct our energies to things we can justify as being of equal or greater importance (so that it isn't dropping out, but dropping into something we need or want). It is very tempting when our society opens the door to this.

For some of us, dropping into something else just isn't an option. It never was for

me. It may not be for you. So what do we do? Here, I rely on advice I got many years ago from Professor Stoa, who you may remember is a super-star achiever who seems to do a hundred things at once – running a very productive lab, running several companies, running two institutes and, I think, planning to run for President. (Oh, and he runs every day as well.) He told me how he does it: feed the nearest wolf. When the wolves are circling, and they always are, you feed the nearest one. It buys you a little time. Sometimes it's the best we can do. And sometimes the nearest wolf has nothing to do with science.

There's more to think about here, and more to write about, but I'm going to go and have another cup of 'tea'. But of course, I don't drink tea.

Love,  
Mole

**Molette**

Journal of Cell Science 122, 2783-2785  
Published by The Company of Biologists 2009  
doi:10.1242/jcs.058354