Welcome to the BPC Newsletter. Hopefully we’ll give you useful information, and entertain you with original articles. Have suggestions about what we should cover or want to contribute an article? Contact Tim Connelly at connelly.tim@gmail.com. You’re also encouraged to respond to the writers through E-mail if you feel strongly about an article. You can also start a conversation by joining the Penn post-doc community on LinkedIn under University of Pennsylvania Biomedical Postdoc Networking Group. If there is any problem you are struggling with (tax withholding, perhaps?), these should be places where you can go to commiserate and share information with other post-docs.

Becoming a parent during your postdoc: Not such a crazy idea after all
By Ken Wannemacher

As I’m sure this audience knows, being a postdoc is not easy. With long hours, frustration over inexplicably failed experiments, pressure to publish and a salary that rivals a recent college graduate with a bachelor’s degree, it is certainly understandable to think that the postdoc years are not the optimal time to start a family. This may be especially true if your spouse is also a postdoc. My wife and I found ourselves in this exact situation and as a new father, I have to say, while the disadvantages outlined above may be true, there are also many benefits to being a parent and a postdoc.

Similar to how preparing a grant application forces you to take a step back and assess your research, having a child makes you re-evaluate your career goals. This is especially critical to avoid falling into the 6+ year postdoc trap that happens far too often. The harsh reality is that record-low NIH funding rates, fewer tenure-track positions and an overabundance of qualified PhDs has made the path to becoming an established investigator extremely competitive. If running your own lab is not your ultimate goal, there are many career alternatives that utilize both the specialized and transferrable skills that postdocs possess. Whichever career path you choose, the postdoc period provides a great platform to explore career options and a child provides the fuel to drive your ambition.

While the financial compensation that postdocs receive is probably considered by most to be unsatisfactory and insufficient in the long term, postdoctoral positions with established mentors provide relatively good job security in the short term, particularly if you are able to secure your own funding. This is especially valuable in our current economic climate and absolutely indispensable when you have a family to support.

Finally, and probably most importantly, there is usually some flexibility with bench research that cannot be afforded with other jobs. While PIs demand high quality data in a timely manner, it has been my experience that they don’t care if you generate that data by working 9-5 or 7-3 as long as the data is generated. This flexibility allows you and your spouse to arrange a work-life balance that is healthy, yet productive, for everyone. Of course, all of this is dependent on having a mentor that is supportive in both your personal and professional life. This underscores the need for ample communication between a postdoc and mentor, although that is a topic for another column.

The professional life of a postdoc, while demanding and lacking competitive compensation, often provides short-term job stability, flexible hours and avenues to explore other career opportunities (if desirable). It is these latter attributes that make the postdoc period highly amenable to starting a family while reflecting upon and implementing your long-term career goals. As a new father, I have found that a child is a great motivator. Seeing my daughter smile for the first time out of my career to provide the best life for her. This underscores the need for ample communication between a postdoc and mentor, although that is a topic for another column.

Vendor Fair
By Nicole Speed

The BPC hosted its first Annual Vendor Fair on July 26th in the lobby of BRB, and it was a great success! This event has allowed the BPC to raise money to support future events for postdocs and will become our main annual fundraising event. The Fair was well-attended, with 26 vendors and many postdocs coming out to talk to them, and a free lunch was provided to those who visited the booths. We would like to thank our fellow postdocs and others in the Penn community for their attendance. Your support encourages vendors to participate in our future events, so keep it up!
Building your mentoring team
By Allison Beal
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While effective mentoring can benefit anyone at any stage of his or her career, it is essential for postdocs to seek out supportive mentors. As graduate students, we had thesis committees and other avenues of support. However, as postdocs we seldom have these formal mentoring opportunities and we find ourselves, at times, in this awkward transition period. Most of us look to our advisor for advice and look no further. The problem with this is that while our advisors can serve as good mentors, by definition advisors are not mentors. I am by no means suggesting that advisors are not supposed to guide and offer advice or that your advisor cannot be a great mentor. I bring this up because it is highly unlikely that one individual will fulfill all of your mentoring needs. This is especially true if you want to pursue a career outside of academic science. Regardless of your career path, it is a good idea to build a team of mentors to help you along the way. There are several excellent resources on mentoring (a list is provided below). Here I will summarize what I believe are the main points to consider when choosing a mentor.

One of the first things to do when selecting potential mentors is to identify your career goals, aspirations and areas in which you wish to be guided. By knowing yourself, you will be more likely to choose mentors who can help you attain your goals. Secondly, it is important to seek out mentors you can trust since it is important to openly discuss your ideas and aspirations. I think that this is difficult for many of us. We can easily discuss our scientific research but when it comes to talking about our career plans and what makes us tick, most of us are hesitant to discuss. A trustful relationship with your mentor(s) allows you the opportunity to open up and to use your mentor(s) as a sounding board. In return, mentors can provide advice and constructive criticism to help you gain confidence in your decisions.

Resources on Mentoring

1. Various articles and resources found at www.nationalpostdoc.org
2. Various articles found at www.sciencecareers.sciencemag.org
4. Book: Getting the Most out of your Mentoring Relationships by Donna J. Dean
5. Science Mentoring Research website: ehrweb.aaas.org/sciMentoring/

Next, it is important to consider that good mentoring should lead to opportunities and increased visibility for advancing your career; therefore seek out mentors who can help you gain recognition. This might include introducing you to his or her network of colleagues at meetings or suggesting you for talks at scientific meetings. These opportunities help you get noticed and stand out amongst the crowd of talented individuals in a highly competitive market.

When searching for mentors, it is important to take advantage of all networking opportunities. While networking is a good idea for many reasons (a topic for another article), it serves as a platform to meet and identify potential mentors you may not have considered otherwise. In addition to your advisor, mentors can include other scientists within your organization, peers, or other scientists at outside institutions and companies. However, make sure that potential mentors have the time to commit to the relationship. Don’t be afraid to consider mentors who are not necessarily like you but have similar interests.

After identifying potential mentors, contact them and clearly explain why you have reached out to them. Make sure that you clearly define and communicate your goals. Importantly, be upfront and honest. Clear, effective communication from the beginning will help the mentor know what you expect from the relationship and whether he or she can help you. Once your mentoring relationships are established, remember that you are the driver of the relationship so make the most of it. Build the team that will win for you!

Resources on seeking out mentors

1. MentorNet-www.mentornet.net
2. Professional and field specific scientific organizations
Upcoming Opportunities for Food, Drink, and Talks

**Postdoc Appreciation Week** (Sept. 18-24)
- **Tuesday, September 20th,** 12-1 p.m.
  Seminar by Derek Haseltine, “Re-Energize Your Career”
  Abramson Research Center, Room 123ABC
  Free pizza served at 11:45 a.m.
- **Thursday, September 22nd,** 12-1 p.m.
  Seminar by Richard Woodward, PhD, “Life without Lab Coats: Entering the Business of Science.”
  Abramson Research Center, Room 123ABC
  Free pizza served at 11:45 a.m.
- **Friday, September 23rd,** 3:30-5:30 p.m.
  Science & Society seminar, 3:30-4:30, Title TBA
  Happy Hour with free food and drinks, 4:30-5:30
  BRB 14th floor

**Post-doc Happy Hours**
First Friday of every month (upcoming dates October 7th, November 4th, and December 2nd)
5:30-7:30 p.m.
City Tap House, 3925 Walnut Street
Discounted drinks and appetizers

**Biomedical Postdoc Research Symposium**
October 12th
12:30-5:45 p.m.
BRB Auditorium & Lobby
Talks, posters, and a reception

Employees or Trainees?

By Tim Connelly
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Are post-docs “employees” or “trainees”? It’s been a persistent issue (see Laure Haak’s series of articles for *Science* in 2002), and, given Penn’s change to this year’s tax policy, it’s one that institutions continue to struggle with. In some affairs, Penn seems to recognize the changing demographics of the post-doc (providing health insurance and multiple training opportunities), while in others they seem almost aggressively obstinate (vacation, exclusion from retirement accounts). Communication of why this dichotomy exists is not one of Penn’s strengths. Thus, the following is my attempt to see their point of view.

The post-doc position is meant to be a temporary stepping-stone to an actual career. “A post-doc is not a job” is a mantra I have heard several times. The commitment for a post-doc is almost entirely between her/him and the PI, and it can be nearly as fleeting as either side desires. Post-docs can choose to use their time to train for opportunities in teaching, pharmaceuticals, consulting, patent law, writing, medicine and a variety of other careers. Indeed, we have more freedom to pursue our intellectual curiosity than anyone else in the lab. Contrast this with your PI, who very likely has ever-increasing responsibilities that are unrelated to her/his research goals. Research institutions have a point that it would be unfair to treat these groups as equals. The PI is a major commitment from both institutions and prospective candidates, including the responsibility to represent the institution and advance its standing in all professional aspects. Post-docs are rarely, if ever, held to these standards.

The problem, of course, is then delineating what exactly a post-doc is and what benefits they should receive. The NIH is the driving force behind the standards, since they provide a majority of the funding, and they insist that post-docs are trainees. No clarification has come from the IRS, who have been either cryptically noncommittal or even contradictory in their statements. Furthermore, when an institution’s policies are not in agreement with the NIH, it may find itself treating NIH-funded post-docs unequally for essentially the same work. Still, post-docs are clamoring to be treated as employees. As a group, we are getting older, and these issues bleed into other problems involving the kinds of support our demographic cohort depends on – the kind that the simple designation “employee” would qualify us for: mortgages, retirement funds, day-care and discounted commuting options.

Nevertheless, as research institutions commit more to post-docs as employees, the resulting asymmetries in compensation jeopardize the relative equality and independence of the position. It also threatens to make a post-doc into something it was never intended to be: a career. Penn has shown a desire for more standardized, less capricious policies regarding salaries and benefits, but its policies provide significant incentives to move on that are essential, in their view, to preserve the original purpose of the post-doc. Their exhortation is: keep stepping, lest you become the stone.
Immunology Journal Club

There is a monthly Immunology-focused journal club for postdocs and graduate students held at CHOP. The purpose of the journal club is to allow students and postdocs a forum to openly discuss current immunology-focused research papers in leading journals. One paper is presented a month by a volunteer. This journal club is open to all. If you are interested in attending and in being added to the list please email Allison Beal (allisonbeal25@gmail.com) or Shaun O’Brien (shaunobrien81@gmail.com).

Free Editing Services for Members of the PENN Community

Penn Postdoc Editors Association
www.med.upenn.edu/bpc/editors_club.shtml
We can help with all your editing needs!

• Who are we?
  The Penn Postdoc Editors Association is a volunteer group of postdocs who are interested in the editing/writing career pathway and are dedicated to helping the Penn community.

• How can we help you?
  We provide editing of a variety of different types of documents including manuscripts, abstracts, grant proposals, and slides/posters for meetings.

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