

ISSUE 1: CAREER INTERRUPTION

There are few systems to help researchers with large career interruptions back into research, or help them while they re-establish a career. This is despite various governments espousing equal opportunity. I suggest that Fellowships or systems be established to help formerly successful researchers back into the workforce after a career interruption. Ongoing funding support or eligibility concessions should continue until the researcher can be expected to be competitive with their peers.

NHMRC Fellowships and many other fellowships count years since PhD when determining eligibility. When years before a substantial career interruption are included this impacts heavily on the researcher with a career interruption, because they are not competitive with a peer who spent the same time uninterrupted in research. Some fellowships (from benevolent organisations) even count the time out of the workforce when calculating years since PhD for eligibility (surely an equal opportunity issue).

The current situation also means that some women do not take time out of work to become full-time carers (even though they would prefer to), solely because they know their career will probably end at that point.

ISSUE 2: VALUING THE RESEARCH WORKFORCE

The quality of the research workforce could be improved by improving employment conditions, to attract more people into this career and retain them. Indeed the system seems to promote the employment of new graduates (Research Assistants and Postdocs) and the culling of older researchers (who need a stellar track record and continuous grant success to stay in research). There could be more balance.

Many aspects of a research career reduce the quality of life.

There is continual uncertainty about the ability to earn a living and support a family. The typical researcher is employed on a one-to three-year contract, and renewal is dependent on grant funding. It is difficult to plan holidays, schooling, luxuries that others take for granted, and major commitments.

Burnt-out or unfunded researchers with a Science degree (with or without a PhD) have no professional qualification to enhance re-employment opportunities.

The imperative to win grants creates pressure to work long hours and cuts into family life, relaxation, sleep and health. This includes the pressure to publish, which is one of the main criteria a researcher is judged by.

The pressure to publish means that the scientific literature is growing exponentially, and studies are broken into the smallest publishable unit. The quality and reliability of published research suffers (see Nature 483:531, 29th March 2012, which describes the failure to confirm the scientific findings of 89% of 53 “landmark” cancer studies) – so that not only are the research

dollars originally spent of questionable benefit, but other researchers base their studies on misleading data and waste more funding dollars. This is not just an Australian problem.

Track Record is said to be judged relative to “opportunity” by the NHMRC. But in the end it is scientific colleagues in the Peer Review Panel who make the call, and this must be highly subjective. There is no guarantee that a panel of males takes into account the reduced opportunity of a working parent who has heavy child-rearing responsibilities which limit the amount of out-of-hours work, after-work meetings and travel.

SUGGESTIONS:

1. Support researchers with career interruptions, both to get back into the workforce, and while they re-establish themselves.
2. Establish more “permanent” positions (subject to performance)
3. Place less emphasis on publication record for NHMRC – judge quality rather than quantity
4. Establish formulae for judging the otherwise subjective components track record by NHMRC grants. i.e. for judging publications “relative to the field”, for judging “relative to opportunity”, for calculating eligibility after major career interruptions.