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Demographic shifts

One of the forces that could have a major impact on scientific employment in the near future is also one of the most obvious: retirement. There are signs that a disproportionate number of life-science faculty members will leave their posts in the next few years, making room for younger replacements.

For example, about a third of the academic staff in the University of Cambridge's pharmacology department is over 60. One professor will retire this year, three in 2003, and another in 2006. These departures will mean new recruits — assuming that the department maintains its size.

In *Naturejobs* earlier this year (see pages 4–5; 19 July 2001), several European immunologists anticipated a similar trend in their field. And in this issue, some Italian scientists predict an imminent shortfall in the young blood needed to replace those who will retire over the next decade (see overleaf). Italy's academic system appears to be exacerbating the problem — many young Italian scientists are finding better funding and career prospects abroad.

So far, the overall evidence is anecdotal and scattered. But as it accumulates, it grows more convincing. The question is, what to do about the expected deficit. It might be irresponsible to ask universities to start churning out huge numbers of PhDs — that would only recreate the clogged pipeline that newly minted life scientists have travelled through in recent years.

But it may be appropriate to encourage young scientists not to abandon all hope of ever attaining an academic career. And for those countries experiencing a scientific brain drain, it would be prudent for them to acknowledge the problem before the glut of scientific talent turns into a shortage.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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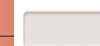
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