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Moving benchmarks

Levels of support for postdocs in the United States, where biomedical stipends vary between \$25,000 and \$65,000, seem at best to be inscrutable — and at worst simply arbitrary. Whatever the rationale used to set their wages, most postdocs would agree that their salaries are too low, especially when statistics such as median income based on amount of education are included in the equation.

Conventional wisdom suggests that the benchmark for biomedical postdoc stipends is set by the National Institutes of Health (NIH). But this benchmark — which is itself based on another benchmark, the pay of medical residents — is in a constant state of flux, and subject to political and economic pressure.

The political pressure is spearheaded by foundations such as the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, based in Maryland. By offering higher stipends than the government, these organizations hope to drive the benchmark upwards. Meanwhile, industry often offers even higher salaries in a bid to siphon the best and brightest away from the academic world.

The pressure from both sides is coming to bear, as *Naturejobs'* first feature devoted to postdoc and studentship issues reveals (see page 5). The NIH has promised to raise stipends by 10–12% a year over the next few years. This would bring a third-year postdoc's salary in line with that of a first-year medical resident, but would still leave first- and second-year postdocs lagging behind.

What are the ramifications? Industry is likely to continue to outbid government-funded stipends, because the NIH target for experienced postdocs is still below what many companies are willing to pay a promising, if inexperienced, scientist. And foundations will continue their push to move the benchmark higher, especially for less-experienced postdocs.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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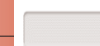
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