

Contacts

Publisher: Ben Crowe
Editor: Paul Smaglik
Marketing Manager: David Bowen

European Head Office, London

The Macmillan Building
 4 Crinan Street
 London N1 9XW, UK
 Tel +44 (0) 20 7843 4961
 Fax +44 (0) 20 7843 4996
 e-mail: naturejobs@nature.com

Senior European Sales Manager:
 Nevin Bayoumi (4978)

UK/ RoW/ Ireland:

Matt Powell (4953)
 Andy Douglas (4975)
 Frank Phelan (4944)

Netherlands/ Italy/ Iberia:

Evelina Rubio Hakansson (4973)

Scandinavia: Silje Opstrup (4994)

France/ Belgium:

Amelie Pequignot (4974)

Production Manager: Billie Franklin

To send materials use London address above.

Tel +44 (0) 20 7843 4814
 Fax +44 (0) 20 7843 4996
 e-mail: naturejobs@nature.com

International

Advertising Coordinator:

Hind Berrada (4935)

Naturejobs web development:

Tom Hancock

Naturejobs online production:

Ben Lund

European Satellite Office

Germany/ Austria/ Switzerland:

Patrick Phelan, Odo Wulffen
 Tel + 49 89 54 90 57 11/-2
 Fax + 49 89 54 90 57 20
 e-mail: p.phelan@nature.com
o.wulffen@nature.com

US Head Office, New York

345 Park Avenue South,
 10th Floor, New York, NY 10010-1707
 Tel +1 800 989 7718
 Fax +1 800 989 7103
 e-mail: naturejobs@nature.com

US Sales Manager: Peter Bless

US Advertising Coordinator:

Linda Adam

Japan Head Office, Tokyo

MG Ichigaya Building (5F),
 19-1 Haraikatamachi,
 Shinjuku-ku,
 Tokyo 162-0841
 Tel +81 3 3267 8751
 Fax +81 3 3267 8746

Asia-Pacific Sales Director:

Hideki Watanabe
 e-mail: h.watanabe@nature.jp

You can't go home again

Contrary to the title of Thomas Wolfe's novel, you can go home. It is just particularly difficult if you're a scientist, and even more so if you're from a country such as Italy or Spain where local patronage plays a big part in career advancement. But several scientists I visited in Italy this month have managed to leave and return — despite Italy's turbulent science-funding history.

Because they realize they're the exception, they all urge young Italian scientists to go away first. "I'm trying to pass an internal rule," says Pietro Calissano, of the CNR's Institute of Neurobiology and Molecular Medicine in Rome, whose CV covers the United States, Britain and Israel. "As soon as you get your PhD in this institute you must go abroad."

But getting back can be tricky. Sometimes pure luck steps in. Brunella Franco left in 1994 to do a postdoc at Baylor University in the United States under Andrea Ballabio, with whom she had studied in Naples. Ballabio went on to become the scientific director of the Telethon Institute of Genetics and Medicine in Milan. When it moved to Naples in 2000, both Neapolitans found themselves back home.

Lino Polito, director of the Institute of Genetics and Biophysics in Naples, took no chances. In 1971, he left Italy to work with Ed Southern at the University of Edinburgh, UK — but with a guarantee of a position in Italy when the job ended.

The current funding climate in many European countries, including Italy, is not encouraging young scientists to stay put. And schemes such as the European Commission's Marie Curie Fellowship programme are helping them to leave. But scientists who establish themselves elsewhere can sometimes make it back.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



Contents

SPECIAL REPORT

Making the move into science policy p452

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 Information on the
 scientific job market

FOCUS

SPOTLIGHT

RECRUITMENT

SCIENTIFIC ANNOUNCEMENTS

SCIENTIFIC EVENTS