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## The waiting game

Young scientists at Georgetown University in Washington DC heard a tale of woe last month that had them nodding in recognition. Talking to a group of neuroscience postgraduates, Stacie Grossman, an associate editor at *Nature Medicine*, recalled her time in the lab at Georgetown. She had spent a long time crafting a grant proposal and, when it was finished, it seemed to her to be “beautiful”. She was so proud — and protective — of her submission that she drove to the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) in Bethesda, Maryland, to hand deliver it. She presented the proposal to the appropriate programme officer. “And they threw it onto this pile of 6,000,” Grossman said.

But that was the emotionally easy part. Waiting for an answer was painful, she said. The wait, and the accompanying uncertainty, was one of the reasons she began a career in scientific publishing.

The postgraduates at the meeting agreed that waiting — whether it be for a manuscript to be accepted at a journal or for a grant from the NIH — is one of the worst aspects of being a young scientist. “There’s this constant fear of rejection,” said graduate student Jill Weisberg. “Then there’s the actual rejection.”

The students said that handling known unpleasantness — such as low stipend levels or long lab hours — is easy compared with the uncertainties of funding, manuscript acceptance or whether they will ever be able to get onto the tenure track. “A lot of people lose focus because their grant is so delayed,” said Gregory Einch.

Postgrads basically have two choices. Accept and embrace uncertainty, or look for a scientific career that seems more solid. But scientific institutions can help, too, by being quicker with their responses. Because a rapid negative answer may, for some, be less traumatic than a drawn-out positive one.

**Paul Smaglik**  
*Naturejobs* editor



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