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## Breaking the bottleneck

It's not surprising to hear that postdocs are spending an increasing amount of their careers as fellows. Stories have circulated for years about people doing two or even three consecutive fellowships before going it alone. In 2002, for example, US researchers achieved their independence at a median age of 42, according to the National Institutes of Health. But a proposal, released last month by the US National Research Council (NRC), urges a multipronged approach to break the bottleneck between training and independence for young scientists.

The proposal puts forward some bold suggestions. First, it says that funding bodies should cap fellowships at five years. If a lab wants to keep the fellows for longer, it should reclassify them as 'staff scientists', and pay them accordingly.

Second, funding bodies should create more 'bridge' awards to help postdocs escape from the need for their senior investigator's primary grant. Some such awards exist, but many of them are confusing and need to be expanded to be more broadly applicable, says the NRC. There could be a new system, the council suggests, perhaps one that awards 200 investigators \$500,000 over five years.

Finally, these grants should be available to all, not just to young scientists who have preliminary data that predict a successful project. Instead, special new investigator grants should allow them to produce such data and give them a way out of this chicken-and-egg conundrum.

All these proposals offer sensible solutions to a problem that most agree exists — although two things are still missing: money and commitment. Money is limited because of the fickle nature of yearly budget cycles. But the commitment can and should come from senior scientists who acknowledge that a bottleneck exists and are determined to break it.

**Paul Smaglik**  
*Naturejobs* editor



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