

MOVERS

Frank Gannon, director-general,
Science Foundation Ireland, Dublin, Ireland



1994–present: Executive director, European Molecular Biology Organization, Heidelberg, Germany

1994–present: Senior scientist, European Molecular Biology Laboratory, Heidelberg, Germany

1990–94: Associate professor, Department of Microbiology, University College, Galway, Ireland

Unlike many biochemists, Frank Gannon didn't play with chemistry sets as a kid — he was too busy seeking his next intellectual challenge. Interested in law and languages, the University of Galway undergraduate decided to specialize in biochemistry only when a friend mentioned the unfamiliar topic. "When I don't know about something, that's where I want to go," says Gannon.

He continued with a PhD at Leicester, UK, in enzymology, because proteins were in vogue at the time. But for his postdoc, Gannon wanted a change of scenery as well as science. At the University of Wisconsin at Madison, he worked on oestrogen receptors, which were poorly understood at that time. Although offered a job at the Michigan Cancer Foundation, he felt he wasn't yet ready to run his own lab. His journey back to Europe led him to Pierre Chambon's lab in Strasbourg, France — one of Europe's top laboratories.

Eager to prove his own scientific worth, Gannon took on the challenge of creating a successful research programme at the University of Galway without money or resources. "Career-wise, this was not a sensible move," says Gannon. He wrote a manifesto to guide his career goals: create a world-class lab, bring biotechnology into the education system, and influence Irish industry — all of which he had accomplished by the time he left a dozen years later to lead the European Molecular Biology Organization (EMBO).

To help EMBO reach its full potential, Gannon worked to increase communications across countries and create initiatives to promote young-scientist awards as well as researchers in developing countries. These efforts helped spur Europe's restructuring of the research enterprise, including the creation of the European Research Council.

Now Gannon has made yet another career move. Returning to Ireland, he becomes director-general of Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) on 1 July. Patrick Fottrell, chair of the SFI board, believes Gannon's leadership and international standing will prove pivotal to Ireland's efforts to recruit and retain world-class scientists, as well as in attracting high-tech corporate research and development. To do so, he plans to maintain scientific quality at Ireland's universities, even as they expand postgraduate offerings.

Gannon gauges his career success by what he calls "the Rip Van Winkle test". When you move on from a job, is the organization as untouched by your presence as if you'd slept through it, or have you improved it? ■

Virginia Gewin

NETWORKS & SOCIETY

Postdoc redefined

"There is something very wrong here," Elias Zerhouni, director of the US National Institutes of Health (NIH), told the annual conference of the National Postdoctoral Association (NPA) in Berkeley, California, on 30 March. He was lamenting that most principal investigators are 40 or older when they get their first NIH grant. It's a problem the agency is trying to address with the K99 grant, which started last year.

Intended to bridge the gap between postdoc and independent investigator, K99s fund individual postdocs for two years and then travel with them to an independent appointment for three years. In November 2006, the NIH awarded 58 K99s; that should go up to 170 this year, a big commitment given its flat budget.

But the very grant designed to help young scientists gain a foothold shuts many of them out. To be eligible for a K99, researchers must have received their PhDs within the past five years. "Second postdocs are becoming a common thing, and as the length from the defence date grows, you're losing opportunities," says Scott Nowak, who is on his second postdoc at the Memorial-Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York.

It may also fail to serve another crucial role: attracting promising

foreign postdocs to first-time faculty positions in the United States. Non-US scientists are eligible for K99s, but the lure of alternative career paths and attractive options abroad is diverting foreign talent, according to Rajika Bhandari of the Institute of International Education, a non-profit research group. A 2007 report by the Lumina Foundation for Education estimates that by 2025, the United States will be short of 16 million workers holding an associates or higher degree.

Zerhouni defended K99 as a "defining experiment" in how best to prepare the next generation of scientists. He said it was not intended to make broad changes.

Pushed by the NPA, the NIH and the US National Science Foundation recently settled on a joint definition of postdoctoral scholar, stating that postdocs are in a period of "mentored advanced training" designed to move scientists along their "chosen career path". That establishes a research sponsors' duty as adviser and implicitly acknowledges that not all careers are academic, says Diane Klotz, chair of the NPA's board of directors. But Zerhouni, noting that postdocs fill highly specialized roles within labs, urged the NPA to do more. ■

Monya Baker

POSTDOC JOURNAL

All ears

I recently returned from a conference of about 500 participants where almost everyone works on corn (maize). The experience got me interested again in a field that's no longer my primary focus.

The conference was particularly engaging because my principal investigator assisted with the introductions. Also, my second child's impending arrival made for an easy conversation starter. I presented a poster with brand new data — on a mutant I'm characterizing — that I was quite excited about. But I also included on the poster an older photograph of corn ears with sterility defects that I thought the community at large might be interested in. I was amazed that the latter generated far more excitement than the former for most viewers.

Unlike earlier years, I received a lot of suggestions and lots of encouragement. It was great to have so much attention for my project, to have so many people wanting to hear about it: this was not the case on many previous occasions. Also encouraging, I met a researcher whose work intersected with mine. We talked extensively about his results and my previous work, which got him very excited. It seems that there is a budding interest in this field now that I've left it. Did I miss the wave or, maybe, did I start it? Either way, it's satisfying to see my work appreciated, even though it took some time. ■

Moira Sheehan is a postdoc in plant breeding and genetics at Cornell University.