

with concussion and had broken some bones. But their safety strategy prevented tragedy — their car had a sturdy frame, seat belts and air bags, and had been carefully packed to prevent injury from loose equipment.

### KNOW WHEN TO SAY NO

To stay safe, researchers sometimes need to breach local social protocols or act in ways that might seem rude. Medical anthropologist Patricia Omidian, co-director of Focusing Initiatives International, a non-profit organization in Monsey, New York, once broke a tooth while working in Kabul. At a recommended dentist's clinic, she saw no sign of soap, alcohol cleansers, gloves or disinfectants. Drills went from one mouth to another without getting cleaned. She left immediately. "Don't be nice," she says. "If it's not hygienic enough, you're out of there."

Similarly, Yu observes the behaviour of drivers when he's on research trips in the Peruvian Amazon and China, and if he suspects the drivers have been drinking, he politely sniffs their breath for alcohol. He tells them to slow down if they're driving fast. "You have to be a little bit bossy," he says.

**"There are no rocks worth losing your life over."**

"That will save your life."

Indeed, one unfortunate experience can be an effective teacher. "There are no rocks worth losing your life over," Godin says.

But despite the hazards, researchers point to a range of rewards of fieldwork — from publication in influential journals to personal growth. Omidian, for example, has discovered deep wells of human compassion that have helped to inspire her. A woman she met in Liberia during the height of the most recent Ebola outbreak was caring for nearly two dozen people without health-care facilities or equipment — just plastic bags, chlorine and soap. "Even in the worst situations, people can be kind and generous," Omidian says.

Omidian remained in Liberia during the worst of the Ebola outbreak in 2014, to gather data about people's health concerns, because she believed in the importance of her work. "Everyone was scared, people were dying — it was really frightening," she says. But after her team had been talking and listening to local residents, the emotional tenor shifted. "People started saying, 'We're a community. We have to deal with this.' To be part of that was really special."

Such inspirations and experiences keep researchers coming back to the field again and again. Six months after his snake bite in Brazil, Dick returned to the rainforest, where another fer-de-lance lunged for his waist. This time, it missed. ■

**Emily Sohn** is a freelance journalist in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

# TURNING POINT

## Uncertain future

*After the referendum in June in which the United Kingdom elected to leave the European Union, Victoria Forster, a cancer researcher at Newcastle University and a UK native, wrote a column in The Guardian supporting her foreign colleagues and predicted how Britain's exit (Brexit) might affect cancer care. She explains why she probably won't be returning to the United Kingdom after her forthcoming postdoc in Canada.*

### Describe your reaction to the Brexit result.

Like the vast majority of academics, I didn't want Brexit. The potential impacts were so clearly negative. The night after the vote, I attended a birthday party for a Polish friend with five people from the EU. It was so demoralizing. These are talented, hard-working, qualified people working in medical research. The vote had made them feel very unwelcome.

### What was the response to your piece in *The Guardian*?

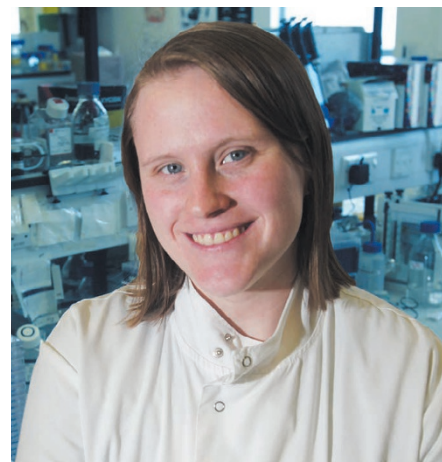
From scientists and other academics it was extremely positive. Many people thanked me for giving these perspectives a voice. Some relatives of people with cancer were horrified that research relevant to their family's care may be impacted. It was something they hadn't thought about. Of course, a few people made comments about scaremongering, and said that research wouldn't be affected.

### Has the vote affected your European friends in the United Kingdom?

I haven't seen anything myself, but I have close colleagues and friends from mainland Europe who have been insulted on the street. Some won't speak to their children in their native language in public any more.

### Has Brexit changed your career plans?

I had already accepted a postdoc in Toronto before the Brexit vote, but had assumed I would return to the United Kingdom afterwards. I have a house and family here. But even in the lead-up to the referendum, seeing the intolerance directed at my colleagues I went off the idea of coming back. I think it's likely that there will be funding problems in a few years, when I would have come back. I will investigate staying in Canada, or perhaps going elsewhere outside the United Kingdom. I know at least four or five other Brits who have said they will leave the country as soon as their contracts are up. But it's



not something everyone can do, especially if they have children.

### How would you describe the UK funding outlook?

It's always a scramble for funding and everyone spends large amounts of their time writing grants. This is a further hit. The big UK cancer charities rely to some degree on investment portfolios and their budgets must be modelled quite far in advance. I would not be surprised if there is less money available in future.

### Are any of your grants in jeopardy?

I was planning to apply for EU funding for a project that builds on early results on a rare side effect of a drug for childhood cancer. I collaborate with researchers in Scotland, the Netherlands, Sweden and Germany on the project. That grant application is now up in the air. For that project, there are simply not enough people in the United Kingdom alone to create good data and records. We need to collaborate with Europe.

### How would you describe the atmosphere now?

The shock is over, but things are still uncertain. My EU colleagues are resigned to the knowledge that they have no confirmation of status, and we realize we're not going to get new information until the politicians are ready. Much of what people thought a Brexit vote was for is unravelling. There's likely to be no additional money for health services or for immigration reform, as was claimed before the vote. It was all so predictable — but I don't feel any satisfaction. ■

**INTERVIEW BY VIRGINIA GEWIN**

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.