

Private foundations push for higher postdoc salaries

Michael Teitelbaum:

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The levels of most postdoc salaries at US biomedical research institutions are set by the National Institutes of Health. But private philanthropies, which consistently claim such stipends are insufficient, have worked to boost these wages by sponsoring studies on salaries and by offering their own grants with higher levels of support.

“On average we think postdoctoral stipend levels are way too low,” says Michael Teitelbaum, a programme director at the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, which supports a range of scientific research. “We’d like to see them reflect the sophistication, maturity and the high levels of education of their recipients.”

Foundations have helped to “stimulate a fairer approach to compensating postdocs and I think that’s appropriate”, adds James Gavin, a trustee of the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, an organization devoted to health and healthcare.

Such stimulation seems to be bearing fruit. Last year, annual salaries for the NIH’s National Research Service Award (NRSA), which funds extramural training grants and fellowships, were \$28,260 for entry-level postdocs, rising to \$44,412 for those with at least seven years’ experience. In March 2001, the NIH promised to include annual cost-of-living increases, and to raise the stipends by 10–12% per year until they reach \$45,000 for new postdocs.

If enacted for this year, these rises will help the NIH to catch up with its own benchmark — house staff salaries at US medical schools, which are now 10–15% higher than the NIH stipends. But any catch-up will not be complete — third year NIH-funded postdocs will achieve parity with their clinical peers, but those with less experience will still lag behind.

A BENEFICIAL ARRANGEMENT

Each foundation has its own approach to making its stipends better reflect a postdoc’s worth. Some offer more benefits, others offer higher pay and some use both incentives. At the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) in Maryland, for example, postdocs — known as research associates — are funded through their investigator programme and their salary levels are linked to the NRSA stipends. Minor adjustments are made to that benchmark depending on the cost of

living where the associates work. But because they are considered HHMI employees, the associates receive a healthy benefits package, which is a marked difference from NRSA postdocs, whose benefits are governed by the policy of their home institutions.

Several years ago, when setting postdoc salary levels for its bridging grants in the biomedical sciences, the Burroughs Wellcome Fund, which backs research in the medical sciences, took into account postdoc salaries at organizations such as the NIH, came up with an average, and then exceeded that figure. The salary levels in these grants are reviewed every two to three years. They provide support for up to two years in a postdoc position and three years as a new faculty member, with a total possible award of \$500,000, which also provides a 10% administrative fee to the university to cover health benefits. The maximum salary for the first year is \$38,000, and \$41,000 for the second, with some home institutions supplementing this salary. When grant-holders become faculty members, the grant covers salary and research expenses.

VARIABLE SUPPORT

The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation supports research in theoretical neuroscience through grants to five centres, whose principal investigators in turn support postdocs. Four years ago, Sloan officials told these grantees that they were not comfortable with stipends of less than \$32,000 for any postdoc at any level of experience.

Although stipends vary between foundations, there is more discrepancy among fields and subdisciplines, and bioinformatics is top of the heap. For computational molecular biology, in which Sloan runs a transitional postdoctoral awards programme with the Department of Energy, the stipend is \$50,000, out of which the recipient must buy health benefits.

The Burroughs Wellcome Fund takes the same approach for its ‘interfaces in science’ awards, used to train postdocs from the physical, chemical and computational sciences to apply their skills to biological problems. Stipends are higher to attract people from computer science, who tend to receive higher pay than their peers in biology. But the latter seem at last to be on their way to achieving parity. ■

Karen Kreeger is a freelance science writer based in Philadelphia.

Web links

- NIH research training opportunities
- ♦ grants.nih.gov/training/nrsa.htm
- National Academies’ report
- ♦ www.nationalacademies.org/postdocs
- Howard Hughes Medical Institute
- ♦ www.hhmi.org
- Alfred P. Sloan Foundation
- ♦ www.sloan.org
- Burroughs Wellcome Fund
- ♦ www.bwfund.org
- Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
- ♦ www.rwjf.org