Last week’s meeting of the American Society for Cell Biology in San Diego, California, heard some tough words from the director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), Elias Zerhouni. Using a phrase he has repeated often in speeches this year, Zerhouni began his keynote talk with the words: “Never before have so many novices faced so many disincentives to entering or continuing a research career.” It was a phrase that resonated with many in the audience. But, as Zerhouni revealed, these words were not his own — they were written in 1982 by William Raub, who was at that time associate director for research and training at the NIH.

Zerhouni nevertheless agreed that times remain tough for life scientists in the United States — despite the fact that the NIH’s budget is at a record high of some $28 billion, after doubling between the years 1998 and 2003. But since that massive leap, the agency, which funds more than half of all US life-sciences research, has seen its budget stay flat — or even dip below inflation — with much of the money being taken up by grants funded at the beginning of the doubling cycle.

Worse still, the bigger budget seems, in some ways, not to be going as far as it once did. The amount of money requested for many biomedical grants has increased dramatically; reflecting the greater size and complexity of such research. Meanwhile, the success rate for applications has actually declined, a phenomenon Zerhouni calls “post-NIH-doubling fatigue syndrome”.

The situation is especially troubling for young scientists — those who have the most difficulty landing the awards that would help them achieve autonomy. Zerhouni began addressing the problem with a new scheme called ‘Pathway to Independence’ — the first grants in this were announced last month. The programme funds fellows for two years under a mentor and three years once they are on their own. If the NIH does indeed give 150–200 such awards a year over the next five years, as Zerhouni intends, there should be less of a disincentive for young scientists to pursue research. Pushing NIH funding above inflation would help, too.

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