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Meet patients to get your motivation back

Biomedical scientists risk forgetting what they're working for if they don't connect with the people who are affected by their research, says **Tal Nuriel**.

Most research scientists, especially in biomedicine, can probably remember when their early wide-eyed enthusiasm started to wane. For me, it was during my time as a research technician at New York University Langone Medical Center. One afternoon in the lab, I announced that I really wanted to “cure a disease” one day.

My comment was innocent and genuine, so I was caught off guard when a couple of postdocs in the lab laughed at it. They told me that researchers don't ‘cure’ anything any more; at best, they develop drugs effective enough to secure government approval, and even that is nearly impossible.

My idealism dampened further as I made my way through my graduate studies at the Weill Cornell Medical College in New York. My work centres around the effects of nitric oxide on Alzheimer's disease, and although my passion for the work is pure — my grandmother had the disease — I soon abandoned the idea that my research would ever make a real difference to actual people. The realities of research began to weigh on me, and with each failed experiment and exhausting late night, my focus in the lab shifted further away from trying to help people and closer towards trying to complete my thesis and publish enough papers to help me to secure a job after I graduated.

I found myself wondering whether there might be ways to halt this shift in focus and motivation, which so many young researchers experience. Then I found one. Back in January, in the middle of my seventh year of graduate studies (please shoot me), I enrolled in a ‘self-expression and leadership’ course, for which I had to organize a community project. And so it was that on a Thursday night in May, a little under 100 people directly affected by Alzheimer's gathered in a Manhattan bar to meet and mingle with about 20 young researchers, all of whom were trying to, if not cure the disease, then at least lessen its effects.

I called the event a Meet the Researchers night, and I was staggered by the interest. I invited patients and care-givers with the help of the local chapter of the Alzheimer's Association. Immediately after the invitations were sent out, we received a flood of responses, and ten further chapters said that they wanted to organize similar events in their cities. Apparently, meeting young scientists was more desirable than I had foreseen. And my colleagues were equally enthusiastic: with e-mails and help from administrative departments, I was able to recruit graduate students, postdocs and assistant professors from most of the major universities around New York.

At the event, all the scientists did an amazing job of welcoming the guests and being patient

with their questions. One sat with a rather intense older gentleman for nearly an hour, fielding question after question and smiling all the time. As most of the older guests left and the bar thinned out, many of the researchers turned their attention towards each other. At that point, I realized that an unexpected benefit of the event was that it brought together 20 young researchers from the same city and with the same research interests, to meet and interact for the first time.

For me, the most touching moment was when I met a woman called Beth, whose father had recently been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. We discussed research for a while — then Beth started to talk about her father and how his amazing memory had been a source of pride for him before the disease had struck. Her eyes began to fill with tears, and she stopped mid-sentence, the emotions pouring over her.

I put my hand on her shoulder and told her that it would be OK, comforting her as best I could. And as she regained her composure and continued with her stories about her dad, I remembered why I had organized this event in the first place. Although I had witnessed the effects of Alzheimer's disease first hand — both as a child, watching my grandmother's slow deterioration, and as an adult, witnessing my mother's anxiety about succumbing to the same fate — it had been a long time since I had directly felt the heartache of seeing a loved one slowly fade away. Talking to Beth, I reconnected with the pain and suffering that this disease causes, and with why research into it is so important. I remembered that Alzheimer's disease isn't just the abstract images of plaques and tangles that I show in my presentations. It is a real and devastating

condition and the only real hope for those affected by it — perhaps even for my own mother — is the research that my fellow scientists and I conduct.

In my opinion, this sort of event should be repeated on a much grander scale. It is crazy to me that, although the patient community spends countless hours raising money for researchers, and the research community spends countless hours working to find treatments for patients, there is actually almost no direct contact between these groups.

If you are a biomedical scientist, there are plenty of reasons to organize a Meet the Researchers event in your area. And I can tell you from experience that doing so will not only renew your motivation in the lab: it will also reconnect you with the reasons you got into science. ■

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THAT THERE IS
ALMOST NO
**DIRECT
CONTACT**
BETWEEN PATIENTS
AND
RESEARCHERS.

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