

From the grapevine

Summarize yourself in the form of a title of a paper in Nature.

Stochastic events govern individual lineage and fate in the MD–PhD physician–scientist career pathway.

Who has been the most important mentor in your career?

The key mentoring steps in my career came as a result of the combinatorial effect of unique individuals at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center in Dallas and the University of California, San Diego (UCSD). At Parkland Hospital in Dallas, clinical rounds were made each day with a star-studded cast of physician–scientists assembled by Don Seldin, who emphasized that it was not only possible to mix state-of-the-art clinical medicine with world-class science, but that the two were synergistic. This was at a time when the poles of science and clinical medicine were starting to diverge at many other medical schools. As a fledgling physician–scientist, I benefited from the unique collaborative and collegial environment in La Jolla, where the cross-institutional barriers are few, and the scientific–clinical bridges are many.

What literary character would you employ as a postdoc?

John Le Carré's spymaster, George Smiley.

What's your favourite conference destination, and why?

The Salk Institute in San Diego: architecturally breathtaking, scientifically exciting and within walking distance of the UCSD campus.

You have the audience in your hands, but some smart-alec asks you the killer question you have no idea how to answer. What's your response?

Invite them to an interview for a position in my lab.

What book is currently on your bedside table?

The Impressionist by Hari Kunzru.

What music heads the playlist in your car or lab?

Bob Dylan's *Tangled Up in Blue*.

The job of Captain on the Starship Enterprise in Star Trek has become vacant. Nominate any real person, living or dead, for the post.

Roger Revelle or Jonas Salk. Respectively, they built up UCSD and the Salk Institute from raw ideas to a leading public university and independent research institute within 20 years.

Where and when would you most like to have lived or worked?

Same time and same place, but oh, to be 20 years younger...

What was the worst/most memorable comment you ever received from a referee?

"This grant is a high-risk fishing expedition."

You are on a plane behind two students obviously going to the same conference, who start to talk about your work. What do you do?

Put on my Bose headset and hope for the best.

What do you most dislike about having research published?

Work that addresses complex aspects of human disease usually has multiple authors; there needs to be an improvement in the assignment of credit to each. This type of work requires a 'village' that extends beyond the first and senior authors.

What do you do to relax?

Wine works well with my Chinese alcohol dehydrogenase deficiency.

What would you have become, if not a scientist?

A wine master.

What previously under-recognized sport or pastime should be included in the Olympic Games?

Fly fishing — it requires skill and knowledge of where, when and what, rather like finding key genes within human disease pathways.

If you were reborn as a comic-book superhero, what would be your superhuman power?

Functioning normally without sleep.

Under what conditions do you have your greatest and most inspired ideas?

Drinking wine.

Is there a 'tyranny of reductionism' in how scientists are trained today?

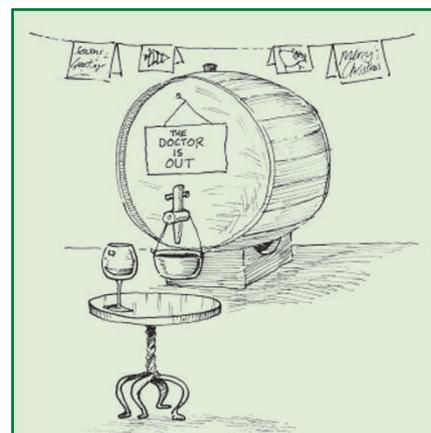
I believe that innovation lies in the integration of ideas from many fields. We now can think of approaching human biology with an arsenal of tools that transcend reductionism. In a sense, we have been training Olympic athletes to compete in single events, when now the future may belong to the decathletes who excel in specific events, but are trained broadly enough to function well in others. To do this, a new interdisciplinary infrastructure for training in the biomedical sciences will be needed.

What's the one thing about science that you wish the public understood better?

That the future of medicine is science, science and more science.

You've just been told (in confidence) that the world will end tomorrow. What do you do next?

Put on my Bose headset and pour a glass of the best wine I can find.



Ken Chien

Ken Chien is the director of the Institute of Molecular Medicine at the University of California, San Diego, and a professor in the university's department of medicine and at the Salk Institute (adjunct). His hobbies include wine tasting, oriental art and losing to his daughters at tennis.

What overlooked or underrated discovery really changed the science in which you work?

The ability to miniaturize *in vivo* physiological assays for complex aspects of heart function in the living mouse, which normally has a heart rate in excess of 500 b.p.m. and an aortic diameter of less than 1 mm.

Which field in science deserves more funding?

Studying the origins of humanity using the tools of modern biology.

What would you change about Nature?

Be wary of starting too many more journal spin-offs.

What music would you have played at your funeral?

The second movement of Bach's double violin concerto.

I detect a certain oenological theme in your answers — and yet you are a cardiologist. Is drinking wine really good for you?

The development of a great wine is a prime example of conquering biological complexity. Although the raw ingredients are related to climate, geography, pedigree and cultivation, real achievement often requires a unique combination of art, science and the human skills of taste, discrimination and passion. Around the globe, where there is wonderful wine, there are usually wonderful people.

This happens to be the last Lifelines column. Do you have any further wisdom you'd like to impart, before we turn off the lights?

Without mentors, there would be no lifelines.

Thank you