

WALTER AND ELIZA HALL INST.



Practical policies can combat gender inequality

Mechanisms to help researchers to balance work and home lives have made a positive difference to the gender balance at my institute, says Douglas Hilton.

How can science address the gender-inequality problem? It is a persistent issue that has been highlighted again by the controversy over the recent comments by Nobel laureate Tim Hunt about his “trouble with girls”?

The problem in biomedical research was starkly demonstrated to me just before I became director of the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute of Medical Research in Melbourne, Australia, in 2009. I chaired my first meeting of the senior academic staff and, despite having had a high-profile female director — Suzanne Cory — for more than a decade, none of the 20 department heads or professors in the room were women.

I pledged to improve the gender balance, and five years on, I think we have made some progress. We now have four female professors or department heads. That is hardly a reason for wild celebration, but given that we began from such a woeful base it is a start.

So what have we done? Simply, we asked the people affected — women in their postdoctoral period — for their ideas.

For our institute, some of the simplest changes included steps to ensure that all important meetings are held within school hours, to make sure that researchers with child-care duties can attend.

We have also set up a dedicated office with hot-desks and an adjoining room in which small children can play and older children can do homework or watch television, under the supervision of their parents.

And we designated a separate room to allow women to breastfeed their infants or to express milk. The idea of women expressing milk in a toilet or a sick room — as was done before — seems as inappropriate as having a researcher making their coffee there.

What else? We demand that at least half of speakers at all conferences and workshops organized by the institute are women. And we created a gender-equality committee, with men and women, to monitor implementation of policies, gather data on progress and challenge us with new ideas.

That was the easy stuff. Some steps required more thought, major investment and time. The trend over the past 30 years of postponing scientific independence by having researchers work for longer as postdocs is generally problematic, but especially difficult for many women, because those career-defining years overlap with child-bearing years. Female postdocs are placed in an invidious position: take some time off and have your productivity drop to near-zero for a period, or postpone having children in the hope of obtaining a faculty position.

So we deliberately started to appoint faculty members at a younger age, in their early to mid-thirties, perhaps after a 2–4 year period as

postdocs. This provides women with resources they can use (postdocs, research assistants and students of their own) should they take time out from full-time work to have children and to care for them.

For women who have children during their postdocs, we offer technical support, paid for by the institute to make sure that their projects progress while they are on maternity leave.

We introduced a 5-year, Aus\$1.25-million (US\$960,000) fellowship to support a female laboratory head, who can spend the money as she wishes. It can pay for salaries, for instance, or for consumable expenses. And, given that the high cost of child care can prevent women from returning to work, the institute helps to pay for it — up to Aus\$15,000 each year for female postdocs and lab heads with pre-school-age children. Yes, men pay for child care too, but we have a surfeit of male lab

heads, and we cannot afford to do it for everyone.

We also pay for our female scientists to take children and a carer with them to academic conferences, both here and abroad. This can cost hundreds or sometimes a few thousand dollars, but we think that presenting at meetings is important for career development. We also pay for a ‘family room’ at local conferences to allow researchers to listen to talks while accompanied by their children — which is good for both men and women.

We want to do more. We are planning an on-site child-care centre and new fellowships to support women returning after extended leave. And we are considering making the lab-head role more flexible. Could it be done as a job-share, for example, with two faculty members splitting supervisory responsibilities, each working three days a week?

We know that these steps have made a difference. Some are expensive, but the ‘my-institute-has-no-money’ argument is rarely a good excuse for inaction. Every institution has some discretionary money and can choose to spend it in these ways rather than, say, on over-generous recruitment packages for well-established (usually male) scientists.

Bigger changes have occurred when we have spoken openly, passionately and sometimes bluntly about our situation and the challenges faced by women more broadly in Australian academia. The Australian Academy of Science has become a leader in gender-equality discussions. The Australian Academy of Technological Sciences and Engineering has undergone a similar cultural change. And the National Health and Medical Research Council has issued guidelines and minimum standards on gender equality to institutions that wish to receive funding. This is progress. ■

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