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Setting salaries straight

Science is often portrayed as an altruistic enterprise, with its participants willingly sacrificing income, personal life and job security during their long educational and training period. Although these sacrifices may be real enough, the willingness with which they are undertaken may be more of a myth.

To combat the problem, charitable organizations in the United States (see *Naturejobs* 5; 10 January 2002) and Britain have been trying to boost stipends and salaries through the funds they offer, in the hope that governments will follow suit. But the overall approach has had mixed results and unintended consequences.

On one hand, the people who receive higher stipends from foundations are understandably happy. But governments have been slow to pursue pay parity, although both the US and the UK governments are showing signs that they are at least considering slowly bumping up stipends.

But as long as a lag between the two persists, problems will inevitably occur. Mary Phillips, a programme officer at the London-based biomedical charity the Wellcome Trust, notes that, in some cases, salaries funded by the charity can be 30% higher than those for similar positions paid for by the government. Although people are not supposed to talk about salaries, scientists still know which organization is funding whom — and, indirectly, can put together a picture of pay disparity. “It can lead to some tensions in the lab,” Phillips says.

It is human nature for some resentment to occur in such situations — even in a supposedly altruistic profession. But that resentment should be channelled and directed at the government funding agencies, not the foundations who push for better scientific wages or at the people who receive them.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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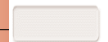
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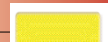
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