

GRADUATE JOURNAL

Home or abroad?

I have always treasured the global nature of science. But now, as I try to decide between a postdoc in Paris and a similar position in the United States, this beloved characteristic is hampering my choice.

When I started at graduate school, the thought of going abroad for a fellowship never crossed my mind. But my time at Rockefeller University in New York has changed my thinking. Here, as an African-American and a US citizen, I am actually in a minority among my classmates in terms of both ethnicity and nationality. The plethora of positive interactions that I have had with the community of international scientists on campus has given me a fresh view on working overseas.

One factor that may weigh heavily in my final decision is the level and stability of government funding for scientific research in the respective countries. The recent protest by French scientists in response to their government's spending plans was alarming. Other aspects I am considering include overall quality of life, cultural surroundings and the feasibility of obtaining a faculty appointment. As the quality of science is excellent in both places, making a decision will be hard. Certainly, one good thing has emerged from my dilemma — I pay a lot more attention to how the dollar is doing versus the euro than I used to. ■

Tshaka Cunningham is a fifth-year graduate student at Rockefeller University in New York.

Protecting the public investment

The training of young US scientists as they move through the academic system is supported by an investment of limited public funds from government and private foundations. As a US taxpayer, I want to be assured that this investment is recruiting the highest level of talent and providing the best training environment for our future scientific leaders.

As a postdoc, I see great potential for improving the return on this investment. It is the responsibility of the whole scientific community to take action to ensure that postdoc training is as good as it can be. Numerous groups and individuals have defined steps that could be taken, including increasing postdoc productivity and creativity by improving mentoring and professional

development programmes; recruiting and retaining the highest level of talent by boosting the compensation and benefit packages to meet the needs of our maturing postdoc population; and restoring the motivation of postdocs who feel uncertain about their future by improving career-development training. Unless we address such issues, we risk losing our brightest and best to other enterprises.

All levels of the scientific community must come together to improve and enhance postdoctoral training. To aid this process, the US National Postdoctoral Association (NPA) will bring representatives from all levels of the community together at its second annual meeting on 16–17 April in Washington DC. The common theme for the meeting is the responsibilities and actions — at various levels, including individual,

institutional and national agency or association — for improving postdoc training. The meeting aims to pool resources, develop collaborative strategies, and enhance the interaction of the NPA with the broader scientific community. This should help to protect the public investment and continue to move the scientific community beyond the nebulous concept of 'fair' or 'we deserve it' to one of shared responsibility.

The meeting coincides with the Convocation on Enhancing the Postdoctoral Experience, which will review the status of US postdocs. Hopefully, these meetings will mean that in years to come, the postdoctoral experience will be such that we readily retain the brightest and the best. ■

Steven Wendell is a postdoc at the University of Pittsburgh and an executive board member of the US National Postdoctoral Association.
♦ www.nationalpostdoc.org

MOVERS

Paul Billings, vice-president, Laboratory Corporation of America Holdings, North Carolina



Paul Billings earned an MD learning to treat humans and a PhD studying murine immunology. But it was insurance that really changed his career.

Billings became well known for his early work on the discriminatory uses of genetic information. But in 1997, when he found himself at the helm of the VA Heart of Texas Health Care Network, he was forced to deal with "how we valued

things, how we allocated funds, who we covered and for what".

Healthcare providers were "bombarded" by new research information and technologies. What was adopted and how delivery systems changed in response was complex, but these were crucial factors governing what applications could go forward.

Meanwhile, the number of molecular genetic tests was increasing rapidly, helping patients to make their own healthcare decisions. Fortunately, mentors and academic research training prepared Billings for this new world.

His basic science work combined with his role as a clinical provider and administrator helped him to realize that genetic screens might play an increasing role in deciding who gets what kind of treatment. "How predictive genetic technology was going to be assimilated into healthcare was the key flash point for me," he says. "It's the positive side of the

use of genetic information in healthcare."

So in 1999, he co-founded GeneSage, a genetic-services company based in San Francisco. He sees his latest appointment as vice-president and national director for genetics and genomics at the Laboratory Corporation of America in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, as the next step, because the company is a leader in evaluating, developing and distributing genomic screening and diagnostic tests nationally.

Billings says now that his success has come about partly because he kept his interests varied — for instance, lecturing in anthropology and contributing, in the early days, to studies of the social, legal and policy implications of the Human Genome Project. That approach is contrary to what many academics now tell their students, he says. "Scientists should not feel like they are hurting themselves by having broad experiences," he explains. ■

CV **2003:** Adjunct professor, anthropology dept, University of California, Berkeley
1999: Founder, GeneSage, San Francisco
1997–2000: Deputy network director and chief medical officer, VA Heart of Texas Health Care Network
1995: Founder, CBR Systems
1994–7: Associate clinical professor, Department of Medicine, Stanford University Medical School; Deputy chief of staff, VA Palo Alto Health Care System
1990–2: Vice-chairman of medicine, California Pacific Medical Center, San Francisco
1988–90: Instructor, Harvard Medical School