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Swatting flies

It is five years since the National Academy of Sciences issued its seminal report on employment conditions for US postdocs. Last month, at a convocation in Washington, postdocs and policy-makers gathered to assess the progress being made over the issues identified by the academy's Committee on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy (COSEPUP), which produced the report.

Summing up the situation, Maxine Singer, chair of COSEPUP, noted that some postdoc programmes have improved pay, benefits, mentoring and career advice. But, she added, the underlying problems — notably a system that treats postdocs as cheap labour — have kept the majority from making significant gains.

Indeed, Singer compared efforts in the past five years to “swatting flies”, because the effects seem to be so diffuse and varied. For example, the stipend level at the US National Institutes of Health has risen, but the agency's National Research Service Award, widely viewed as a benchmark worldwide, hasn't always been followed (see *Nature* 427, 178–179; 2004). And benefits such as health insurance and child care vary widely from institution to institution, even though most of the funding for postdocs comes from a few common sources.

“Maybe we should look at fundamental issues,” Singer suggested. Her thoughts on reform include setting strict deadlines for how long a postdoc can last, limiting the number of fellows in each lab and increasing the number of postdocs funded through independent grants rather than through a principal investigator.

These changes will make some senior scientists uncomfortable because they would have to relinquish some of their power. But ceding some control to postdocs would ultimately benefit both parties because more young scientists would be more willing to stay on an academic career path.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor

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