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Granting longevity

Aaron Marcus has reason to celebrate. Last month, the physician scientist got his grant renewed for another five years — on work he started in 1955. The renewal makes him one of the longest continuously funded recipients of a grant from the US National Institutes of Health.

Marcus received his initial funding at the age of 29, while he was at the Veterans Affairs New York Harbor Healthcare Hospital and the Weil Medical College of Cornell University in New York. The grant was for a fellowship that would help him to isolate and characterize the role played by platelet lipids in blood clotting. He's admits that it is a little bit "old school" to stick to one research theme for nearly 50 years. But by doing so, he has teased apart many particles and processes involved in clotting. His aim has been to help reduce the number of fatalities caused by thrombosis, which, he says, leads to a death in the developed world every 30 seconds.

The key to getting and keeping his grants — and making progress in untangling the process of clotting — has to do with asking very direct questions of himself and of his scientific goals, according to Marcus. When he teaches grant-writing, he says, he asks his protégés: "What are you gonna do? How are you gonna do it? Is is new, interesting and important?" Born in Brooklyn, New York, he retains a trace of his accent. "If you can answer those three questions, with quality, you'll get the grant."

These rules haven't changed since he wrote his first grant, Marcus says. What has changed is that you need to show, early on, how the basic science could translate into medicine. "When you write a grant now, you need to show that it's relevant to public health," he says. Although he can't guarantee that doing so means you will be funded for 50 years, it may be good enough for the first five.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor

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