

Contacts

Publisher: Ben Crowe
Editor: Paul Smaglik
Marketing Manager: David Bowen

US Head Office, New York

345 Park Avenue South, 10th Floor,
New York, NY 10010-1707
Tel +1 800 989 7718
Fax +1 800 989 7103
e-mail: naturejobs@nature.com

US Sales Manager/ Corporations:

Peter Bless
Classified Sales Representatives:
Phone: +1 800 989 7718
New York/ Pennsylvania/
Latin America:
Kathy Roman
Midwest USA/ Maryland/ NIH:
Wade Tucker
East USA/ Canada:
Janine Tschirna

San Francisco Office

Classified Sales Representatives:
Michaela Bjorkman
West USA/ West Corp. Canada
225 Bush Street, Suite 1453
San Francisco, CA 94104
Tel +1 415 781 3803
Fax +1 415 781 3805
e-mail: m.bjorkman@nature.com

European Head Office, London

The Macmillan Building, 4 Cran Street,
London N1 8XW UK
Tel +44 (0) 20 7843 4961
Fax +44 (0) 20 7843 4996
e-mail: naturejobs@nature.com

Naturejobs Sales Director:

Nevil Bayoumi (4978)
European Sales Manager:
Andy Douglas (4975)

Advertising Production Manager: Bill Franklin

To send materials use London
address above.
Tel +44 (0) 20 7843 4814
Fax +44 (0) 20 7843 4996
e-mail: naturejobs@nature.com

Naturejobs web development:

Tom Hancock
Naturejobs online production:
Niamh Shields

European Satellite Office

Germany/ Austria/ Italy/
The Netherlands/ Belgium:
Patrick Phelan
e-mail: p.phelan@nature.com
Raya Silso
e-mail: r.silso@nature.com

Japan Head Office, Tokyo

MG Ichigaya Building (5F),
19-1 Harakabamachi,
Shinjuku-ku,
Tokyo 162-0841
Tel +81 3 3267 8751
Fax +81 3 3267 8746
Asia-Pacific Sales Director:
Rinoko Asami
e-mail: r.asami@nature.com

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Generous advice

In a competitive world, the best way to get ahead is by sharing, Martin Raff told a group of postdocs last month. Raff, an emeritus biology professor at University College London, was giving career advice to some 100 postdocs from the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL) during their first ever 'retreat' from the bench and their principal investigators (see page 244).

That advice was passed on from lessons Raff learned during his own postdoc days at Britain's National Institute for Medical Research. Raff trained as a physician and neurologist and began his research career in immunology in Avron Mitchison's lab. Mitchison passed a project to Raff that would soon make the younger scientist's international reputation: the hunt for a T-cell marker. Raff, using an antiserum provided by Mitchison, hit the jackpot. And when it was time to publish the results, Mitchison refused to put his own name on the paper. Instead, he advanced the name of his protégé, despite having guided the work and provided the original impetus.

Following Mitchison's advice, Raff made the antiserum freely available. That accomplished two things. Directly, it helped confirm that Raff had found what he thought he had. Indirectly, it advanced Raff's scientific reputation much faster than if he had simply published one paper and refused to share the reagent.

Raff told the EMBL postdocs that they should consider sharing too — the fastest way to test your findings is through the recruitment of other scientists who perhaps aren't as willing to believe them as yourself, Raff said. If your findings emerge from this crucible intact, they are probably correct. And sharing ideas, techniques and reagents with the larger community is a better way to advance the scientific process and foster useful collaborations than hoarding them in a cupboard. Lock them up, and you may end up wondering why no one has come looking for you.

Paul Smaglik
Naturejobs editor



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