

MOVERS

Eva Feldman, director, Taubman Medical Research Institute, University of Michigan Medical School, Ann Arbor, Michigan



2005-present: Director, Neuropathy Center, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan

2001-present: Director, ALS clinic, University of Michigan

2000-present: Professor, Department of Neurology, and Director, Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation Center, University of Michigan

Eva Feldman's affable demeanour belies a tenacity that has enabled a successful and wide-ranging career in neuroscience. At the age of 11, she took solo bus rides to downtown Indianapolis to volunteer at a hospital as a way to explore her medical aspirations. Undeterred by repeated advice that she pursue a less demanding career, she became an academic clinician. In her new role as director of the Taubman Medical Institute at the University of Michigan, she wants to promote high-risk, high-reward research.

After studying biology and chemistry, Feldman decided to pursue a master's degree in neuroscience at Indiana's University of Notre Dame. But while pursuing her MD-PhD at the University of Michigan she found that she loved being a clinician. She became chief resident at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland, and the first neurologist to win its medical teaching award.

She returned to the University of Michigan to begin her career, in part because her husband accepted a job in the area. Setting aside institutional 'in-breeding' concerns, she says her familiarity with the place has helped her fully realize research opportunities.

For example, as part of a programme in neurology research and discovery started in 2000, she was able to build multiple collaborations across departments. Since then she has created, and become director of, two centres and a clinic focused on the complications of diabetes, amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS, or Lou Gehrig's disease) and, most recently, neuropathy. She runs a neuroscience lab of 14 postdocs and nine research assistants.

The secret of her success, she says, is delegation. She credits management courses on executive leadership in academic medicine with teaching her to create an infrastructure to juggle the needs of so many posts — even using technology such as wikis to post project materials.

As director of the new Taubman Medical Research Institute, she plans to oversee novel high-risk research — not typically funded in today's competitive climate — including the pursuit of stem-cell-based ALS therapies. Her colleagues are excited to have a leader eager to take risks at a time when most academics put forth conservative proposals to secure funding from the National Institutes of Health.

"The successes may not outnumber the failures, but new, innovative treatments will be worth the risk," says Sid Gilman, director of the University of Michigan's Alzheimer's Disease Research Center.

Virginia Gewin

NETWORKS & SUPPORT

Japanese postdocs seek their path

Responding to concerns over the uncertain career paths for postdocs in Japan, we recently carried out a survey at seven universities — Osaka, Tohoku, Hokkaido, Waseda, Nagoya, Yamaguchi and Kyushu — and the institute of physical and chemical research (RIKEN). Our fields included science, engineering, agriculture and health care. It was the first such survey at multiple institutions in Japan.

A total of 3,870 people responded just after the end of fiscal year 2005: about a quarter of the roughly 15,000 postdocs in Japan during that period. Two-thirds (2,592) stayed postdocs at the same institution they'd been in during the year; 8% (310) had become postdocs at other institutions; 19% (752) were doing other work, studying or unemployed; and the occupations of the remaining 6% (216) were unknown. Of the 752 who changed their type of work or role, 82% entered research and development (R&D) professions and 9% entered occupations requiring specialized knowledge (such as teachers, doctors, occupations related to intellectual property, coordinators for industry-university collaboration, or science and technology communicators).

The percentage of Japanese versus foreigners who became postdocs at other institutions — as well as who

became non-postdoc R&D workers — were similar. Of Japanese postdocs, 72% stayed in Japan and 7% went to the United States. Among non-Japanese, 24% stayed in Japan and 20% moved to China.

More women were unemployed at the end of 2005 than men. More engineering postdocs than scientist postdocs became R&D professionals outside Japan; in Japan, more engineers than other postdocs became private-sector R&D personnel. The average age of becoming a lecturer was 34.2, associate professor 36.9, professor 44.4 years. The number of people becoming postdocs at other institutions decreased with age.

As this was the first large survey of its kind, it is not clear whether job prospects are getting better or worse. But it is worth noting that more than 80% of those who obtained non-postdoctoral positions were able to enter R&D professions. For each institution, the results suggest that the different forms of career development or support may be necessary, depending on the field, to diversify postdocs' career options. ■

Toshiyuki Misu is a senior research fellow, and Akira Horoiwa an affiliated fellow, at the National Institute of Science and Technology Policy in Tokyo.

POSTDOC JOURNAL

Fruit medley

I'm a fan of quality produce. So when I told my wife that oranges and other locally grown citrus fruits were reasons for staying in Israel to pursue a faculty position, she retorted: "Get your priorities straight!"

The truth is, I'm not that shallow. I moved to Israel to study genes controlling natural variation in tomatoes, and I thought we might stay for scientific and personal reasons. But now I realize I'm as American as the New England apple pie I grew up with. So when I recently committed to job hunt in both countries, I mulled over what might become a near literal 'apples versus oranges' decision.

How should I choose? The considerations are endless: institution, colleagues, funding, a partner's career, family and friends, children's education, and the political and social climate. And then there is the need to learn skills beyond the bench, such as becoming an effective teacher, marketer and collaborator.

How am I coping? I'm gathering as much information as possible. The key to making informed decisions is seeking advice from the right sources. Consulting former mentors and colleagues who also struggled through this transition is helping to lift the fog. Merging the best of both worlds is impossible. So now I'm stressing about the decision, and when I stress, I get hungry. A fruit salad of, say, apples and oranges would hit the spot. ■

Zachary Lippman is a postdoctoral fellow at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem's faculty of agriculture.