

# naturejobs

**JOBS OF  
THE WEEK**

Officials at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) in Chevy Chase, Maryland, last year went on a 'listening tour', travelling around the United States to hear first-hand about young scientists' struggles to secure funding. "People at the early stages of their career are standing in line," says Jack Dixon, the HHMI's chief scientific officer. "There are a lot of quality people in this country who are struggling to get their first grant." Dixon says words such as 'queue' and 'holding pattern' were used a lot by young scientists — especially when talking about the R01, the main grant used by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) to fund individual investigators.

NIH data confirm the anecdotes. The success rates for new grants fell from 26% in 2000 to 19% in 2007. And renewals haven't fared much better, falling from 50% in 2000 to 36% in 2007. The problem is a lack of money, rather than a dearth of quality scientists, says Dixon. For the past five years, the NIH budget has been relatively flat, which means that much of the money is spoken for, given that its grants typically run for five years. This may affect young investigators most, because young first-time applicants generally have a lower success rate than their more experienced peers. As a result, the average age of first-time R01 recipients has risen from the mid-30s of 1980 to a high of 42, says Dixon.

"If that's the norm, then we're losing people during the most productive years of their research career," Dixon says. The HHMI this week announced a programme to help address this problem. It plans to fund up to 70 young scientists for six years, from a pool of some \$300 million. Only researchers who have led independent labs for two to six years are eligible. And although scientists with existing R01s can compete for the grant, researchers with support from multiple foundations won't be eligible. "We want to spread the wealth around," says Dixon.

Dixon acknowledges that funding 70 scientists won't solve the problem, but he hopes that other organizations will follow suit — and that the NIH can find the money and the wherewithal to support more early-career scientists.

## Paul Smaglik is moderator of the Nature Networks Career Forum.

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