

Q&A

Stephen Morris, a postdoc at the Centre of Molecular Materials for Photonics and Electronics at the University of Cambridge, UK, is the winner of the 2010 Young Scientist award from the British Liquid Crystal Society.

What is the best career decision you've made?

Agreeing to be project manager on a large four-year grant funded by the UK Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council. We sought to develop a new generation of micrometre-sized, tunable light sources. Combining two roles — as a postdoc and a project manager — has been difficult, but it has been made easier by the team ethos of this group. The biggest hurdle was definitely being able to juggle my own research at the same time as doing managerial tasks — reporting, planning, and meeting targets for deliverables and milestones for the project as a whole.

Was the award a surprise?

Yes. I checked my email one Friday evening and found out I had won the award. I didn't even know I had been nominated. It is so nice to get recognition from your peers, who understand the intricacies of what you are doing — especially because this is such a small, specialized community. I don't know how much impact it will have on my career over the long term.

When did it become clear to you that you wanted to pursue a career in research?

As a third-year undergraduate, I had the opportunity to produce a thesis that described in detail why there was a discrepancy between the predicted and observed behaviour of solar neutrinos. Scientists had measured fewer neutrinos flowing from the Sun to Earth than was predicted by the standard model of physics. As I tried to make sense of this discrepancy, I realized that I wanted

to do a PhD and pursue a research-based career in science.

How did you get interested in the new field of liquid-crystal lasers?

It was basically the result of meeting someone who offered me an opportunity I probably wouldn't have found on my own. When I was applying for PhD positions, I focused on experimental and nuclear particle physics. Then I met Harry Coles, director of the Centre of Molecular Materials for Photonics and Electronics. He opened my eyes to the alternatives offered by working with liquid-crystal lasers, which I hadn't considered. This burgeoning field really appealed to me because the physics was interesting, cross-disciplinary and had the potential for exciting applications.

What are the potential applications?

Liquid-crystal materials can be made into organic laser devices — which may be useful for medical diagnostic techniques because they are so small. These lasers are the thickness of a human hair and tunable in terms of wavelength, so they can be adapted easily to a host of situations. It may some day be possible to combine them with infrared medical diagnostic tools to create devices that are able, for example, to detect retinal glucose levels associated with the onset of diabetes.

What motivates your work more — the experiments or the applications?

I'm motivated by the day-to-day aspects of doing experiments in the lab. The applications really

interest me, but ultimately small breakthroughs in fundamental research drive any progress towards new applications.

How has working in a small field affected your career decisions?

I've been very lucky to work with some of the leading groups in this new field, so there isn't much reason to move — something one is typically supposed to do as a postdoc. I would be hard-pressed to find another position where I would have both the top facilities and a world-class range of colleagues to work with.

Have you had a career-defining moment?

Being elected as a fellow of St Catharine's College, Cambridge, in 2007 was an important moment for me. It is quite rare for people to be elected as fellows of colleges, the decision being based in part on teaching and research accomplishments, unless they have a full academic position at the university — I was a postdoc and a project manager at the time. As I was only on contract, I felt it was some vindication that I was, at least, going in the right direction.

Are you trying to carve out a niche at Cambridge?

Yes. My ultimate goal is to secure a position at Cambridge — and that is certainly no easy feat. It is fiercely competitive here. I'm realistic that, although it is something I'm striving for, it is a long shot. The next few years are my opportunity to prove myself. There is also an element of luck because lectureships usually come up only now and again. ■

Interview by Virginia Gewin



IN BRIEF

Teamwork helps careers

A workshop for Japanese and US female scientists highlighted paths to science advancement and leadership roles, says an initial report released in late August. The Connections workshop on 5–7 July in Saitama, Japan, focused on promising research but also explored networking, mentoring and funding. Participants suggest that collaborations offer women more than just research opportunities: they allow sharing of expertise, data, tools and information on career advancement. And social networking sites such as LinkedIn can help women to find opportunities. A full report will be presented to the US National Science Foundation, a co-sponsor of the meeting, in October.

Women failed by mentors

Mentoring offers fewer career benefits for women than it does for men, says a survey reported in *Harvard Business Review* (go.nature.com/umLiRU). The study, conducted by Catalyst, a New York-based non-profit organization that seeks to advance women in the workplace, finds that less-effective mentoring is one of the reasons that women are less likely than men to be promoted. Researchers surveyed more than 4,000 advanced-degree holders working in drug making, utilities and other industries. They say that women should seek 'sponsorship' from senior managers who will advance their careers. Most mentors offer psychosocial support, whereas only sponsors "actively advocate for advancement", the study says.

Site bridges science divide

A networking website aims to combine attributes of Facebook and Craigslist — enabling users to post entries and take part in discussions — to link scientists in North America and Latin America. The site (cienciamerica.org) was launched on 16 August by Timothy DeVoogd, a neurobiologist at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. Over several months in Central and South America last year, DeVoogd discovered that Latin American and US scientists have little contact. "I met with at least 300 scientists and found that I was carrying information I thought they would know. They didn't," he says. He created the website in Spanish and English to help scientists exchange information on findings, funding and political developments that could affect research.