Even when there is no conflict, PIs may have to sack lab members when funds evaporate unexpectedly. Darren Boehning, a molecular biologist at the University of Texas in Houston, has twice had to reluctantly let go of postdocs when grant money dried up prematurely. In one case, the postdoc had only a month's notice. "Every postdoc contract I've seen says that the position is dependent on funding," he says. In this case, he knew of colleagues who were looking for a postdoc, and the individual was able to move to another lab. She eventually went on to a faculty position — as did the other postdoc who was released ahead of schedule. "You have to help them transition if you can," Boehning says. Not only can such support help to save the career of the person who is being let go, it can protect the PI's reputation.

CLEAR COMMUNICATION

Graduate students and postdocs at the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL) in Heidelberg, Germany, rarely leave their labs before the end of their contracts, says Helke Hillebrand, academic coordinator and dean of graduate studies. Once they pass their one-year probationary period, graduate students are under contract with the institution, which means that any dismissal would have to involve the human-resources department and the graduate-studies office. "They would never be totally dependent on their supervisors to determine their fate," she says.

As with other institutions in the United Kingdom and mainland Europe, EMBL requires graduate students to finish their degree within four years, a rule that puts pressure on everyone to keep student–mentor relationships intact. If a student has to change labs more than halfway through their training, it will be nearly impossible for them to finish in the allotted time, Hillebrand says. After putting so much investment in a student, the institution is highly motivated to mediate any disputes between students and their PIs. "Students are a precious resource for research, so this protects the PI as well as the student," she says.

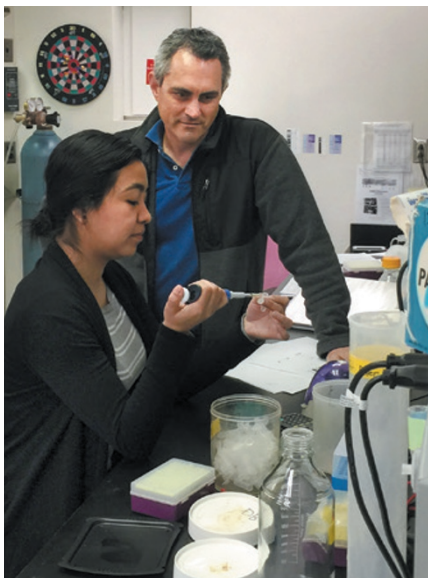
Geneticist Koen Venken has parted ways with three lab members since starting his lab in 2014 at the Baylor College of Medicine in Houston. When he first began to notice lax attitudes and poor production, he gathered the team for a PowerPoint presentation that spelled out his expectations. After seeing little progress, he repeated the presentation six months later. "They had plenty of time to identify their weaknesses and work on them," he says. He told the team that there wouldn't be a third PowerPoint warning. "I also indicated that I was more than happy to work with them to change for the better."

In retrospect, he sees that he might have avoided the dismissals had he been more up front about his standards before bringing anyone into the lab (see 'How to fireproof your lab'). He is now working on a formal agreement letter, complete with clearly stated expectations, that future lab members will have to sign before starting work.

When a PI does have to let a lab member go, it's important to keep the drama at a minimum by using a professional, straightforward approach, says Christopher Edwards, a science-career coach at Still Point Coaching and Consulting in Boston, Massachusetts, and the co-founder and former editor-in-chief of *Nature Biotechnology*. "There's a risk of having someone very angry with you after leaving your lab," he says. "One of my clients had to get a restraining order against a former grad student." He also knows of a case in which a disgruntled lab worker sued a former PI for plagiarism because the PI published a paper without including his name.

In Caffera's experience, messy break-ups can often be traced to a lack of clarity early on. "Scientists tend to be so respectful of each other that they're not clear in their communication," she says. "They speak obliquely. I would encourage them to be much more direct. People tend to assume they're doing a good job unless you tell them otherwise."

Laboratory lay-offs are likely to be far from the minds of most junior researchers — until they find themselves in a lab that isn't working. The silence around the issue makes it hard for PIs to anticipate or react to strife in their own labs. Venken hopes that other PIs can take something away from his experience. "It's very sensitive," he says. "But if no one is willing to talk about it, no one can learn from it." ■



SCOTT COLLUM

Molecular biologist Darren Boehning works with graduate student M. Iveth Garcia.

Chris Woolston *is a freelance writer in Billings, Montana.*

PUBLICATION

Preprints pondered

A trio of commentaries explores whether it makes sense for early-career scientists to post public copies of articles before they are accepted by journals — or even submitted to them (see G. McDowell *F1000Research* **5,** 294; 2016). The authors, who include elite scientists, junior faculty members and postdoctoral researchers, examine whether depositing work on preprint servers is an opportunity or a vulnerability for young researchers. Early-career scientists harbour concerns about persuading colleagues to agree to a preprint, being ignored or receiving criticism on social media or from senior members of the field. But preprints also allow them to demonstrate their research productivity independently of unpredictable publishing timelines. It is unclear how preprints are taken into account by grant reviewers or hiring and promotion committees, and many researchers worry that the data could be used by rivals who might then beat them to publication. But early disclosure can also spark fruitful collaborations, says one author, who credits his preprint for initiating connections that accelerated his follow-up work. The commentaries are linked to last month's Accelerating Science and Publication in Biology meeting in Chevy Chase, Maryland.

TRAINING

Postdocs to learn online

A group of prominent US scientists from the academic, government, industry and non-profit sectors aims to create an online training centre to collect career-development resources for postdoctoral researchers. Most postdocs end up in jobs away from the laboratory, but career-development training for them is patchy across institutions. The centre would be a repository for lesson plans, materials (including the individual development plan tool, a career-development workbook that is available online or through host institutions) and resources (such as a list of certified training advisers) to help universities to create career-development programmes. All such content on the website would be peer-reviewed and checked, and a steering committee will address specific issues, such as the target audience for lesson plans and how materials and career advisers will be vetted. The American Society for Biochemistry and Molecular Biology in Rockville, Maryland, has pledged to support the development of the centre with funding and staff time.