

DEAR Labby



Dear Labby,

My Ph.D. thesis research on signal transduction in the endothelium as related to atherosclerosis has gone very well, leading to three first authored (unshared) papers in excellent journals (*Science*, *Molecular Biology of the Cell*, and *PNAS*). So while I thought getting a postdoc position would be logical and linear, instead it has suddenly gotten complicated. I sent out eight inquiries. Two replies said that they were full, and four said they would like to interview me but have grant troubles (the latter included a Nobel laureate and two members of the U.S. National Academy of Sciences—whoa, talk about the funding crisis!). The remaining two are pre-tenure faculty (in their fifth year in both cases), and if I joined their lab, I would be part of that angst. Meanwhile, just as I was preparing to send out more inquiries, my husband's postdoc search has clicked on a lab he loves in Minnesota. This is not his only offer but is the one he really wants to take. We are not open to doing our postdocs far apart. Suddenly I have gone from open exploration to feeling like I'm in a hole.

My husband is starting to feel guilty and meanwhile I wonder if I should now steer all my applications to the land of lakes?

—Constrained

Dear Constrained,

Many finishing students share your belief that the postdoc search will be “logical and linear,” but often it is not, even without a scientist as spouse or partner. Your specific situation is aggravated by the asynchrony of the two searches. You reached for some top labs and missed, through no fault of your own, whereas your husband hit on a position he wants. That he didn't instantly accept is a sign that he understands that couples should make these decisions jointly.

First, you both need to focus on the fundamental logistic issues. Has the Minnesota lab given your husband a decision deadline? Sometimes a faculty member will be willing to wait, whereas in other cases there is a long waiting list of high-quality applicants. If you are about to launch a new set of applications, can he wait, and, more importantly, can he expand his search? He has clearly been attracted to the work of the Minnesota lab, but is it really the only one in his field of interest that is doing pace-setting research? You should also ask the four “full labs” if you could nonetheless interview. Their grant renewals may be in flux, but if you make an exceptional impression, faculty this distinguished sometimes can pull off magic tricks to come up with intramural funds. You contacted them for good reasons, so don't give up too quickly.

On another tack, you could now at least scrutinize Minnesota. This is *absolutely not* to cave in to your husband's choice, but on the chance that there is a world-class lab at the University, Medical School, or Mayo in your area of interest that you might have missed. You know your field so this is probably unlikely, but worth an online search.

Finally, there is the philosophy of “her turn/his turn” in which couples or partners alternate in having the first choice at each career step. This can sometimes work over the long term, but is painful for one person at each step. Moreover, it assumes that each successive career step is of equivalent importance, and that's rarely the case. Labby believes that the odds are invariably against this “academic rhythm method.”

Labby's advice is for your husband to use or obtain as much time for his Minnesota decision as he can while you both search elsewhere. If he is pushed for a final decision before either of you has found desirable postdoc positions at

a common location, then you will have to face that decision as a couple. Ask him to think about how he would handle the converse situation. That may help him completely grasp your situation (not to imply he may not already). You should both read this month's WICB column (see page 14) which, by chance, deals with this very subject (although emphasizing the later faculty search stage). Labby also passionately recommends *Every Other Thursday* by Ellen Daniell,¹ which chronicles the careers, including early steps, of some of America's most outstanding women molecular and cell biologists. It is an extraordinarily human and powerfully enabling book. You may find there a young version of yourself. ■

—Labby

MEMBERS in the News



Helen Blau of Stanford University, an ASCB member since 1978, has been re-elected to the governing council of the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies. Blau was also appointed to the Scientific Advisory Board of the Ellison Medical Foundation, which supports biomedical research on aging.



Vivek Malhotra of the University of California, San Diego, an ASCB member from 1991–2003 and since 2007, has been appointed Chair of Cell and Developmental Biology at the Center for Genomics Regulation (CRG) in Barcelona.



Graham Warren of Yale University, an ASCB member since 1984, has been appointed Director of the Max Perutz Laboratories in Vienna, Austria.

Reference

¹ Daniell, E. (2006), *Every Other Thursday. Stories and Strategies from Successful Women Scientists*. Yale University Press.

Direct your questions to labby@ascb.org. Authors of questions chosen for publication may indicate whether or not they wish to be identified. Submissions may be edited for space and style.