

DEAR Labby



Dear Labby,

I have been a postdoc for 10 months but it has become clear that I cannot function in my present lab. I was drawn to it by the PI's research (microRNAs in early mouse development). But what I hadn't anticipated during my interview or when checking out this investigator was his surprisingly authoritarian style. I have my own ideas about this project and have tried to place them into my research in a scientifically appropriate manner. But my PI rigidly demands that I carry out certain experiments. Moreover, he gives me technician-like instructions, down even to the time points to be examined, number of replicate coverslips for in situ hybridization, etc. It is clear that he treats all his postdocs this way, so at least I am not being singled out. During my interview for this position I had been told by the postdocs in the lab that they have the "typical" degree of freedom. Now I realize they might not have known what "typical" is. In any case, I must leave.

The question is how to approach this with my PI. Do I start applying to other positions and, when contacted, describe why my current PI cannot be a reference? What does Labby advise?

—Outward Bound

Dear Outward Bound,

A new position of any kind is sometimes surprisingly disappointing. You seem to be certain about the intractability of your problem. However, apparently you have not discussed it with your lab head. In whatever way you decide to approach finding a new position, you have nothing to gain, and potentially much to lose, by going behind his back. He might be willing to speak with prospective employers in a supportive way (e.g., "I continue to believe Harry has a lot of potential, which is why I took him, but our ways of approaching this project simply differed, and he has decided at this early juncture to move on"). Or he may decline to write at all, in which case you can explain the situation to prospective employers.

Labby has been approached by postdocs in your situation and has not prejudged the basis of their dissatisfaction with their current labs. Of course, if you think your current PI will present a negative opinion in reply to queries, there is simply nothing you can do about it. Any prospective employer "knows where you live" (in the workplace) and, if sufficiently motivated, will call your current lab head.

One basis for some optimism is that it sounds like your PI has not acutely reprimanded you over the differing approaches to the project. It may be that his take on you is along the lines of the hypothetical quote above. If this turns out to be the case when you meet to discuss this, you should be able to seek other positions with little if any stigma. It is also good that 10 months is sufficiently brief so as not to create a major hole in your overall training and productivity. Perhaps the most regrettable aspect is the way your PI views his postdocs. The kinds of experimental detail you indicate he specifies are certainly demeaning. ■

—Labby

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.

Even more sensitive control

With the NEW **accu-jet® pro** pipette controller!

The successor to the popular **accu-jet®** pipette controller.

- **New sculpted grip** – no hard edges; comfort for small and large hands
- **Continuously variable speed** – touch-sensitive speed adjustment
- **New range dial** – set an upper speed limit for critical operations
- **Power management** – 8 hours on one charge, with warning LED
- **Instrument protection features** – check valve, filter and vapor exhaust
- **Simple soft blow-out** – protects cell pellets

For a limited time, we'll even mail you a **FREE accu-jet® pro** when you buy three from leading lab dealers. Available in royal blue, dark blue, magenta and forest green accents.



BRANDTECH
SCIENTIFIC, INC.

Toll Free (888) 522-2726
Product & promotion details at www.brandtech.com

