correspondence

Comment on Jack Parker's article 'How much is a scientist worth?' in *EMBO reports*, November 2002

What is frequently overlooked when comparing scientists' salaries is the situation in the pre-accession countries to the European Union (EU) that are likely to soon join the EU and its labour market. This will definitely change the comparison of average postdoctoral salaries as laid out by Jack Parker in his article. As an example, the lowest possible salary for a postdoc in the EU mentioned is €17,700. This is twice the minimum standard salary of a professor in the Czech Republic and more than three times the salary of a postdoc here, which, incidentally, is actually below the national average income. No further compensation for these researchers is available, and their whole income is subject to further taxation. Yet the wages in the Czech Republic exceed those in Slovakia by 40%, which has already caused an enormous brain drain from Slovakia to the Czech Republic. And since funds for research and universities come, in general, from governmental sources, there will be little chance for change after entering the EU.

There are two major consequences of this situation for scientists in Europe. First, in the short term, there is no danger of Western Europe's scientific potential being completely drained away to the USA, because it can always recruit scientific talent from the Central European countries. Second, unless action is taken at the European level, the education standards in Central European countries will decline swiftly in parallel with the overall competitiveness of these countries. Optimistically, one could wait for some investment in

research by Western European high-tech companies and the subsequent support of universities in these countries. However, the market has already been open for at least 10 years without any indication that this is taking place.

Dalibor Stys
*Institute of Physical Biology,
University of South Bohemia in
Nove Hradý,
Czech Republic*

doi:10.1038/sj.embor.embor750

Comment on Frank Gannon's editorial 'The foot soldiers of science' in *EMBO reports*, November 2002

In his editorial, Frank Gannon points to perhaps not a new, but an important problem in science. We are often only aware of those scientists who have made discoveries or have contributed outstanding and ground-breaking results to a field. And we tend to overlook colleagues who are less fortunate, those whom Gannon calls "the foot soldiers of science". Edmond H. Fischer interjected a joke in one of his recent talks: "What is serendipity in science?" he asked. "It is as if one is looking for a needle in a haystack and one finds there instead a farmer's daughter." Not everyone has the good luck to find a farmer's daughter or to make an important discovery. But that does not mean that his or her work is not important.

In the 1960s, there was a series of articles on the chemistry of DNA, published by two scientists. They treated DNA with various kinds of chemicals, such as mustards, and published data that I—at that time

a Ph.D. student—considered unimportant, simply filling journals with data nobody was interested in. Only later did I realize that their data helped to develop many important methods of molecular biology, including chemical DNA sequencing. And I remember my Ph.D. supervisor telling me at that time that no results, as long as they are correct, can be underestimated. But also that nothing can be more damaging than results that are not correct. Now I know he was right.

Which brings me back to the editorial. Many scientists today are contributing valuable data, but not making discoveries. Their lives are often difficult and full of tension. They may not obtain grants, and they have to defend their programmes again and again at departmental meetings. Most of them love research, and do not want to leave it. Gannon discusses possible ways the scientific community could deal with this problem, and I would also like to comment on that. At a recent meeting of the European Union (EU) 6th Framework Programme Committee for Life Sciences, Genomics and Biotechnology for Health, one delegate articulated the concerns of some countries that their scientists would not be involved in the final selection of supported projects. This would mean that the top tier of European scientists, with well-endowed laboratories, would get even more money compared to those from poorer countries. In other words, the less wealthy countries would support research in rich countries. This may not only be a problem for EU candidate countries, but for others as well.

As the Czech delegate to the European Molecular Biology Council (EMBC), I have had an ongoing dispute with our Ministry of Education, which pays the membership fee of the Czech Republic to EMBC, about joining the European Molecular Biology Laboratory (EMBL). This would be more costly than our EMBC membership, and the argument of the ministry was that we were not even recouping what we paid to the EMBC in fellowships and other means of support. To achieve a balance, it was very important to inform the Czech