Balancing responsibilities

As a scientist and a parent, I read with much interest the recent editorial about problems combining a career in science with raising children (Gannon F (2005) Family matters. *EMBO Rep* 6: 999). I do not have answers to many of the points raised, but, based on my personal experience, I would like to comment on how it is possible to balance family responsibilities with scientific career paths and how to help overcome the under-representation of women in our profession. These goals require some creative thinking and flexibility, but given that we are scientists, this should not be too difficult.

On a small practical point, it might be a good idea for senior scientists to advise young fathers—who are less likely to do this than young mothers—to take into account their family responsibilities when planning their work responsibilities. Yes, this may mean saying ‘no’ to extensive travel and admitting that working outside the usual hours is often an unacceptable burden. Nevertheless, if fathers insisted on their rights and responsibilities as parents in the same way that many mothers do, this would at least reduce the burden for mothers and prevent some gender discrimination.

We also need to overcome the outdated assumption that “putting family first” inevitably leads to negative consequences, described at least twice as “failure” in aspects of career development. I argue that the statement, “a career cannot be postponed”, is only true under the current career paradigm, which is defined as a series of career steps and achievements that need to be completed as quickly as possible and in many cases within explicit or implicit age limits. There is no objective reason to take for granted that this is the only path to a productive scientific career.

Making choices that deviate from this career paradigm is often disadvantageous.

Again, I would argue that the reason for this is organizational conservatism and not failure to meet objective measures in scientific achievements. I chose to work part-time while my children were at pre-school age. This inevitably meant that I spent a longer period at a post-doctoral level than is considered ‘average’ or ‘usual’ under the current paradigm. I accepted this temporary limit to my scientific productivity—with the emphasis on temporary—yet my scientific achievements, based on papers published, grants obtained and students supervised, did not significantly differ from many of my peers’, even those who worked full-time.

Nonetheless, many organizations make decisions to select candidates for a position, or award grants and fellowships based ‘objectively’ on how much time has passed since a degree was awarded, or simply on age. These criteria are easy to apply but they are neither sufficient nor do they make much sense. I have encountered situations in which funding agencies asked for information about part-time work but apparently did not take it into account when evaluating my performance during the years in question. It seems to me that the path to a successful scientific career does not need to be a uniform, constant timeline. Starting graduate school after working for some years, taking time off to care for children or working part-time for a few years does not indicate a lack of intelligence, skill or dedication. They just slow the process down a bit.

The challenges of combining a research career and family are not so difficult to grasp. There have been several studies to investigate the problem; it is therefore time to do something about it—namely, abandon the narrow criteria that define the timeframe for progress and look objectively at an individual’s achievements, while taking into account his or her personal circumstances. This is also a more scientific approach: evaluate the results based on the conditions of the experiment. Why not apply it to career potential and achievement, instead of

insisting that we all march along the same path.

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Disadvantages for families

I was very pleased to read your recent editorial (Gannon F (2005) Family matters. *EMBO Rep* 6: 999), because I feel that the problems of scientists with families have not adequately been discussed in the scientific literature.

To be a postdoc and raise three children is certainly unusual and it is definitely not easy. Nevertheless, I have made the decision both to pursue my scientific career and at the same time to become a father of three children. In hindsight, I can state with some confidence that my family life is compatible with my scientific career.

However, I see three major disadvantages for anyone who wants to combine family life with science. The first is a lack of time: I spend a lot of time with my family while my colleagues perform experiments and write papers. To compensate for this, I had to give up most of my hobbies, sports and friends. The second disadvantage concerns mobility. I have no doubts that mobility is essential for scientists—my family has already moved three times. At the age of seven, my daughter has been to three schools in three countries and has learned three languages. Now our research group is about to move to an expensive city abroad and I feel this disadvantage again. Although we have managed so far, this time I have no choice but to leave the group and to look for a new job because my postdoctoral salary will

not be enough to support my family in the new location. The third disadvantage involves my wife who gave up her career as a physician and stopped transplanting bone marrow to become a housewife. Although we had to give up the comfort of two salaries, this step was essential for me to continue my research career.

However, when applying for jobs, fellowships or grants, I do not think that I or

any other father-scientists should be treated differently from our colleagues without children. Apart from the disadvantages mentioned above, I think I am as competitive as any other scientist. Scientific excellence should therefore be the main criterion for any such decision. However, there is one privilege that I consider to be important: my postdoctoral fellowship (an EMBO Long-Term Fellowship)

took into account my situation and was sufficient to support my family as well. This additional support significantly improved our ability to cope and helped me to focus on my research work.

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