Holidays in the sun

If you are reading this editorial in the week of publication, chances are that you do not work in one of the countries bordering the Mediterranean. If you are in Scandinavia, this is probably your first opportunity even to read my editorial from July. Most of Europe now takes a full four or five weeks of vacation, usually corresponding to the calendar month of July in the north or August in the south. In part, this is dictated by the timing of school holidays; however, in many industrial or governmental organizations, employees are virtually obliged to take their vacations at the appointed time.

Mostly this is considered to enhance, rather than detract from total productivity, although it can have obviously damaging consequences on scientific research. If everyone wants to take a vacation at the same time, who is left to take care of laboratory animals, cell-lines or equipment, let alone make sure that inexperienced summer students do not run amok in the lab? There are other, even less desirable effects. One colleague, in need of urgent surgery, recently elected to go a private clinic abroad, having been told that 'we don't do operations in the summer'. During my own vacation one July, while travelling in a remote part of the Canadian Arctic, I made the mistake of logging on to my e-mail at a village internet café. I was met with a stream of urgent messages from the European Commission, complaining that they had been unable to contact the administrative staff from my university. Apparently there were some minor blemishes in a project report that we had submitted a year earlier, which had to be corrected before the Commission's staff went off on their own

(August) holidays. Failure to comply meant that we might have to wait another full year for our money. Worse still, the messages seemed to hint darkly that we might be deemed in breach of the hallowed contract and thus never receive our last tranche of funding at all. Given how slowly they seem to work, one might be forgiven for suspecting that the European Commission staff are given the day off every time a public holiday occurs in any one of the 27 member states; on that occasion I simply had to take a couple of days off from communing with the caribou.

There remain enormous disparities in vacation entitlements between different continents and countries, with the USA and Northern Europe at opposite extremes. Every year I am sent a letter by my nominal employer, the Academy of Finland, asking me to list precisely when I will take my 36 days of official paid vacation in the current year. Not only are they concerned that I might try to cheat the system by not taking my full entitlement, but they also need to know when to pay me my special vacation bonus. As every academic will recognize, it is sometimes difficult to tell if one is on vacation or not—possibly never—but filling out this form always needs some creative accounting, and I am often forced to state weakly at the bottom that I'll take the remaining six days—or whatever number of days I really can't find free in my calendar—'at other times, to be decided'.

At the other end of the scale, most American scientists seem to feel exceedingly guilty about taking a week's vacation with the family once every two years, and often think this is only acceptable if they

can tag it on to a *bona fide* academic visit. Placing oneself under such pressure cannot be conducive to maximizing intellectual progress, still less to a life of contentment and harmony. One of the great advantages of academic life is that we can work whenever, wherever and however we choose, and I strongly believe that this principle should operate at all levels of seniority. When one of my graduate students or postdocs comes to ask me—usually a bit sheepishly—if they can take three weeks off, I usually respond by saying that they should not be asking me, but instead they should ask their flies and their co-workers. The point is that they have to get used to the idea that, whatever their contract of employment might say, they are not really working for me or for the university, but for themselves and for mankind, confronting the great wall of ignorance.

In truth, academic scientists are a somewhat unrepresentative group, so it would probably not be appropriate if society's norms were built around our working practices. Even if the rest of humanity could usefully learn to be a little more like us, our work is never going to fit easily into the format of a conventional working day, as our partners, families and friends well know. Taking a proper vacation on a regular basis is one way to redress the balance, restore our links with the real world and recharge our intellectual batteries. If only it were possible to do this just whenever we would wish: but then I might spend my entire life going to punk rock festivals.

Howy Jacobs

doi:10.1038/embor.2009.167