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MOVERS

Stanley Plotkin, board of directors, Dynavax, Berkeley, California

1999–present: Executive adviser, Sanofi Pasteur, Lyons, France
1991–98: Medical and scientific director, Pasteur Mérieux Connaught, France
1991–present: Professor emeritus of paediatrics, University of Pennsylvania
1991–present: Professor emeritus of virology, Wistar Institute, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Stanley Plotkin is widely recognized as a leading authority in vaccinology, and is adviser to the chief executive of vaccine manufacturer Sanofi Pasteur in Lyons, France. Last month, he also took on his very first position on the board of directors for a company — at Dynavax Technologies in Berkeley, California.

The path to his success began when he joined the Epidemic Intelligence Service at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in Atlanta, Georgia. After his training, he angled for an assignment away from epidemiology in the anthrax laboratory at the Wistar Institute in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Although he was not particularly interested in anthrax, Plotkin says he took "a gamble" so that he could work with Hilary Koprowski, who created the first live polio vaccine.

It was an outbreak of inhalation anthrax in New Haven, Connecticut, that changed Plotkin's career. With his co-workers on holiday, Plotkin not only had to detail the clinical course and spread of the infection, but also had to develop a preventative vaccine. "By choosing something no one else wanted, anthrax, I was successful in doing what I hoped to do," he says.

The success of working on a vaccine for a disease that others considered untouchable led Plotkin further away from epidemiology. He subsequently worked on vaccines against polio, varicella, rabies, rotavirus and rubella while at the Wistar Institute and the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia. But one vaccine has eluded him for 25 years: that against cytomegalovirus. The development of a vaccine against a chronic infection such as this presents difficulties not faced with other diseases, he notes. He calls the quest his hobby, but remains optimistic that he will see a licensed vaccine in his lifetime.

Working in both academia and industry has helped Plotkin to guide vaccines from basic research to the marketplace. Having worked as medical and scientific director for Pasteur Mérieux Connaught, Plotkin understands how vaccines are manufactured — often a perspective foreign to academics.

Plotkin advises young scientists eager to develop vaccines to consider working in industry. Despite the ongoing need for basic discoveries, he says that tighter safety and regulatory standards make it easier to develop vaccines in industry than in universities. But the most important thing students can do, he says, is seek the counsel of an adviser who will grant them all the responsibility they can handle. ■

Virginia Gewin

SCIENTISTS & SOCIETIES

Redressing the balance

"I am the only female in my chemistry department and I have often wondered why I have such a hard time being heard in faculty meetings. Sometimes it seems as if I'm being ignored, but then a few minutes later, someone else will say almost my exact words and his comment gets agreement and acceptance."

This is the voice of one of hundreds of women science and engineering faculty members who have come to workshops in the United States run by the Committee on the Advancement of Women Chemists (COACh).

The COACh workshops aim to eliminate gender-bias barriers that hamper the progress of women in science and, in the meantime, to help women faculty members to move up the career ladder and become leaders in their research, teaching or administrative roles. These successes then create role models and mentors for younger women scientists.

Over the past four years, COACh has run workshops to help women enhance their communication and negotiation skills and gain effective leadership techniques. They have also provided information on creating strategies to make institutional and departmental changes that can improve the climate, recruiting and retention of underrepresented groups.

Case studies, theatre, role-playing and lively debate contribute to the learning experience for the 15–20 participants in each session.

More than 300 women have attended the workshops in the past four years. As word has spread through the science community, women scientists in other disciplines have hired COACh lecturers to hold workshops at their home institutions and professional meetings, adding another 700 female academic scientists to the tally.

In October, COACh will hold its first workshop specifically geared towards ethnic minority women who are science faculty members and postdoctoral associates. And it is now collaborating with women scientists in Germany, Britain and South America to bring workshops to these countries. The organization is also designing a series of forums for men and women faculty members and administrators, which will be aimed at improving inclusivity, thereby enhancing faculty and department productivity. The popularity of its workshops in the United States and the interest in them from abroad shows that COACh is fulfilling a previously unmet need. ■

Geraldine Richmond, Richard M. and Patricia H. Noyes Professor of Chemistry, University of Oregon, co-founder and chair of COACh.

http://coach.uoregon.edu

GRADUATE JOURNAL

Back-up plans

My trip to Alaska this summer provided some perspective — both welcome and unwelcome. After spending my summer on the road, I finally laid eyes on the lights of Los Angeles earlier this month. It was late at night and I was too tired to have any profound feelings. A pillow and a real bed were all I desired, so I parked my car and reached for the only possession in it that just cannot be replaced — my laptop. And it was gone. I lost my mind as I made a mental inventory of the files I had created since my last back-up. Days of writing, all of my trip pictures and unpublished lab work were among the first items to come to mind.

I became overwhelmed with worries about my professional future. I had no computer, no job and dwindling funds. But after the initial panic, I quickly began to regroup. Fortunately, a gas station where I had stopped earlier found my bag and is sending it to me. And I've got a lead on an adjunct teaching position for next semester. I still haven't found a job for the short term, but I am not so worried about that — the trip reminded me that there's more to life than science and a career. Now that I've secured my laptop and have some job leads, my future looks brighter than it did when I left for Alaska. And the trip definitely taught me the importance of back-ups — both in terms of computer data and career plans. ■

Jason Underwood completed his PhD in molecular biology at the University of California, Los Angeles, in June.