

MOVERS

Brent Reynolds, director of the Adult Stem Cell Engineering and Therapeutic Core, McKnight Brain Center, University of Florida, Gainesville



2004–08: Visiting scientist, then senior research fellow, Queensland Brain Institute, University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

1992–98: Director, then vice-president and director of research, NeuroSpheres, Calgary, Canada

The price of having too much too soon can be high. When Brent Reynolds isolated and cultured mouse brain cells during his PhD at the University of Calgary in Canada, his career was on the fast track. He eschewed a postdoc to start his own company with adviser Sam Weiss, a neuroscience professor at the university. But after Ciba-Geigy invested in the company, a merger and subsequent divestiture effectively sidelined Reynolds and Weiss's technology. Reynolds went from having his research featured on the cover of a major scientific journal to wondering if he wanted to stay in science at all.

He decided to take a career break. It lasted six years. "I needed some perspective," Reynolds says. "I had become somewhat disillusioned with science, and in particular with science and business." Returning to an earlier interest in Eastern medicine and philosophy, Reynolds devoted himself to studying Chinese medicine, acupuncture and yoga. He established a yoga studio in Thailand, then moved to Salt Spring Island off the coast of Vancouver, where there were "no bridges, no highways, no traffic lights, no parking garages and, importantly, no parking meters".

But his move away actually brought Reynolds back into the scientific fold. At a yoga training course, he met an instructor who called Australia "the coolest place in the world". A few weeks later, former colleague Rod Rietze invited Reynolds to join him at the new Queensland Brain Institute in Brisbane, and his science career took off again.

After a few years in Australia, Reynolds decided to return to North America and join those attempting to translate stem-cell technology into clinical treatments. Dennis Steindler, director of the McKnight Brain Institute in Florida, had admired the neural stem-cell work Reynolds conducted as a graduate student. "His insights are incredible in terms of how to grow them and how to get them to behave," Steindler says. He believes Reynolds's work will help McKnight researchers use stem cells in new brain-cancer therapies. Reynolds expects that his familiarity with the holistic approach of Eastern traditions may help improve the often too-reductionist approach to stem-cell research.

Eastern philosophy also validated his decisions to take a break from science and to return to it. The Taoist concept of *wu wei*, practically applied, advocates following instincts or hunches, Reynolds notes. Steindler hopes these instincts will lead the institute closer to stem-cell therapies. ■

Paul Smaglik

NETWORKS & SUPPORT

Vitae for postgraduate development

Postgraduate scientists in Britain have a new national programme devoted to personal and career development. Vitae — the latest incarnation of the UK GRAD Programme — will cater to both postgraduate students and postdocs (often called 'research staff' in Britain), whose needs, notably job security, often get overlooked by government and institutions.

With 4,500 members, Vitae wants to become academia's national policy instrument for research career development, and to get employers and postgrads talking constructively.

It recently released an updated concordat, with seven principles spelling out expectations and responsibilities. These include employers recognizing the need to retain and value good researchers, and researchers sharing the responsibility and taking up lifelong-learning opportunities. Endorsed by funders, universities, professional societies and the European Commission, the concordat is a clear statement that the development of researchers is as important as research output, says Vitae chair Janet Metcalfe. She notes that many currently end up with an unsettling series of two-year contracts.

Researchers' independence deserves attention as well, says John

Bothwell, co-founder of the UK National Research Staff Association. Instead of spending five to ten years working on a mentor's ideas, Bothwell suggests that young investigators need targeted funding to develop their own research. Vitae may help such proposals by establishing metrics for fledgling scientists' accomplishments that could be used by funding bodies.

"The most effective thing Vitae could do is encourage postdocs to look up from the lab bench and think about their career direction beyond simply publishing papers," says Bothwell. Vitae's website (www.vitae.ac.uk) has links to interactive tools to assess sector-specific skill competencies as well as discussion forums. Its 2008 programme of events includes three- and four-day courses to help postgraduates learn to manage career choices, and two-day Effective Researcher workshops on project management and leadership skills. Vitae will also host networking days for researchers interested in the drug or biotechnology industries.

"Vitae is one of several ways to ensure that Britain's research infrastructure stays world class, even in the face of competition from places such as China and India," Metcalfe says. ■

Virginia Gewin

POSTDOC JOURNAL

An unwelcome intrusion

Western civilization is staring me in the face again, and I'm not sure I like it. By the time this journal entry is published, I'll be hailing taxis in the muddy streets of Addis Ababa and hassling officials for the visa that will allow me back into the United States. I'll be out of my little comfort zone.

For two months I'll be away from the Simien Mountains, analysing data and 'catching my breath' back in the United States. Although I've been missing Western food, company, daily showers and little luxuries like tarred roads, I suddenly don't feel ready to return to Western culture.

My stomach clenches when I think that this is my last week in the mountains. I have a lot of work to do — back-ups of data, last-minute experiments, organizing things so that our permanent field assistant can continue his work until my return in September.

But I'm not feeling that stressed about the work that remains. What I dread is reverse culture shock.

I'm trying to get my mind around the big change about to happen. I'll have a car, watch movies, see lots of friends, eat to my heart's content... These are good things. And I'll be surrounded by tall buildings instead of massive cliff walls, fashion-conscious students instead of crooked-toothed scouts, city lights instead of stars. I think I need a hug. ■

Aliza le Roux is a postdoctoral fellow in animal behaviour at the University of Michigan.