New NIH grant program sends foreign scholars home

by Francesco Fiondella, BioMedNet News

With its newest funding program, the Fogarty International Center (FIC), part of the US National Institutes of Health (NIH), is hoping to stem at least in part the chronic brain drain of scientists that plagues poor and developing nations. The Global Health Research Initiative Program (GRIP), announced this week, gives desperately needed money - up to $50,000 per year for five years - to allow US-trained foreign scientists to continue their research and set up labs after their return home.

"This is the first systematic program that has a long term commitment and a sizable amount of resources to help establish ongoing collaborations between US scientists and their junior colleagues abroad," said FIC director Gerald T. Keusch in an interview. GRIP funding is limited to those researchers currently supported either by FIC international training programs in global health or through the National Institutes of Health's Visiting Program, or to those who have received support within the last three years.

A decade ago, it took junior FIC researcher Raul Padron "several painful years to set up a fully operational lab" upon his return to Venezuela. Padron says he was "tempted as anybody else" to stay in the US or in the UK, where he worked as a postdoc at the Medical Research Council's Laboratory of Molecular Biology in Cambridge. But he wanted to expand the horizons of structural biology for the benefit of his fellow Venezuelans.

"If I had GRIP money at the time," he told BioMedNet News, the delay "would have been zero." (Padron now heads the department of structural biology at the Venezuelan Institute for Scientific Research (IVIC) in Caracas.

Molecular biologist Christopher Plowe of the University of Maryland's Center for Vaccine Development has worked extensively with young foreign scientists and understands the hardships they face by going back home. He is currently collaborating on malaria research with junior colleagues from the University of Mali.

"You hear story after story about how they are unable to get traction, to get started, to do what they have been trained to do - which is research," he said.

Most universities in developing countries pay their faculties so little that scientists must find other jobs, he says. "If they are physicians, they tend to open private practices or clinics; others become entrepreneurs." One of Plowe's former colleagues opened a rock-and-roll theme club while his laboratory equipment gathered dust, because he could not afford reagents.

FIC and the eight other NIH divisions co-sponsoring GRIP hope that their $1 million commitment to the program will help make such scenarios less likely. "Of the $50,000 dollars that a scientist can receive through GRIP, up to $25,000 can be used to pay..."
for direct research support, for buying equipment and
supplies," said FIC deputy director Sharon Hrynkiw. The other
half of the award will be used to pay the salary of the
principle investigator (PI) and any laboratory technicians, she
says. FIC is asking that a foreign institution co-fund half the
PI's salary because experience shows that collaborations are
stronger and longer-lasting under that arrangement.

The GRIP program is directed at scientists who come from the
countries that have a per capita GNP of less then $3000
Hrynkiw said, because NIH recognizes that developing nations
with the greatest burden of disease are least able to address
the challenge.

Picture credit: © Marcel Crozet, World Health Organization
(WHO).

***

Send us your comments for publication.

Sign up for BioMedNet News weekly email alerts.

Printer ready version E-mail article to a friend