

# Comment From the Editor



Gary D. Wu, MD

## On Being a Mentor in Today's Environment

The current challenges in biomedical research and practice in academic gastroenterology make this an opportune time to emphasize the importance of effective mentorship. Being a mentor is a privilege with many responsibilities including serving as an educator, sponsor, advisor, role model, coach, and confidant. In these roles, the mentor should impart certain qualities that are important for the ultimate success of the trainee including, but not restricted to, self-discipline and focus, time management, as well as tenacity and persistence. Identification of a mentor is probably the most important factor to a trainee's ultimate success. Although the area of research focus or clinical expertise is of primary importance in this decision, other factors, such as enthusiasm, availability, and commitment to trainees, must also be considered. Will a senior investigator with many current trainees have the time to mentor yet another trainee? By contrast, does a younger investigator, who is more accessible, have the experience and national stature to be an effective sponsor and agent to promote the trainee's career? One effective way to assess objectively these issues is to examine the track record of trainees whom the prospective mentor has fostered. What was their productivity in publications? Were they able to obtain

independent funding? What type of careers are they currently pursuing? Despite the importance of this decision, most trainees do not have the experience to identify and prioritize factors that need to be assessed in order to make this decision. In this regard, the trainee's Division Chief and/or Department Chair will provide invaluable guidance.

Once a decision has been made, the mentor must be prepared to make a substantial commitment to the trainee in terms of time and resources. It is the responsibility of the mentor to maintain the trainee's enthusiasm for the project. Distractions to the trainee should be minimized including "politicization" of the research process and perpetual "job shopping" by the mentor. Although there are currently many job opportunities for established investigators in academic gastroenterology, the mentor must carefully consider the impact of moving on the career development of his or her trainees. Although such moves may provide new opportunities for a trainee, they may also be very disruptive. Constant visits to other institutions to examine other positions can be a distraction for the trainee and cause a significant level of uncertainty and anxiety. Stability and continuity, as is the case for a family with children, are very important environmental factors that impact upon the success of a trainee during the formative years.

We face challenging times in academic medicine. From the perspective of a physician-scientist, geopolitical issues have increased competition for National Institutes of Health (NIH)-based funding. Clinically, decreasing reimbursements add to the drive to increase clinical activity in order to support the institution. These challenges can make effective mentoring more difficult. Yet, there is probably no more critical time to emphasize the importance of mentorship than during these challenging times. It is tempting for mentors to focus on the challenges that mid- to senior-level investigators face when speaking not only to colleagues but also in the presence of,

or directly to, trainees. However, mentors must remember that trainees do not have the long-term perspective that we have. Although NIH funding is becoming more challenging to obtain, making resubmission of grant applications more the rule rather than the exception, funding levels for junior investigators remain quite promising. Indeed, having served on the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK-C) training grant study section at NIH for nearly 4 years, I know first hand that NIH program officers work tirelessly to preserve resources to ensure reasonable funding levels for junior investigators. Thus, even in today's environment, 30% to 40% of mentored career development awards (KO1, KO8, and K23 series grants) are ultimately funded by some institutes, including NIDDK. Together with the multitude of additional funding opportunities through private foundations such as the AGA Institute's Foundation for Digestive Health and Nutrition (FDHN), for example, the prospects for research funding as a young investigator are very reasonable. Finally, it is important that our trainees recognize that, historically, challenges in research funding are cyclical in nature. Things will get better in the future and reward those who have the persistence and drive to persevere.

Overall, despite some current challenges, clinical practice and scientific endeavors in academic gastroenterology still make for a very appealing career and lifestyle. Among these includes an opportunity to help shape the science and practice of gastroenterology for future generations. At Digestive Disease Week this year, there were two types of attendees, those standing at the podium presenting new findings relevant to the science of digestive diseases and practice of gastroenterology, and those in the audience learning about these advances. It is the excitement of discovery that drives investigators in academic gastroenterology to reside among the former group. Additional factors that attract individuals to a career in academia include

intellectual freedom of thought, practice and word, varied responsibilities, meetings, and prestige.

In addition to these gratifying aspects about a career in academic medicine, the most rewarding is the opportunity and privilege of fostering the career of a trainee. Among the many metrics by which the success of an individual's career in academic medicine can be evaluated, perhaps the most important is the

number of trainees the mentor has mentored successfully throughout his/her career. Indeed, most prominent individuals in American medicine are faculty members who can point with pride to a cadre of former mentees who have gone on to lead successful careers in medicine and are, themselves, serving as mentors. A shining example is the recipient of this year's AGA Distinguished Mentorship Award, Dr Young S. Kim, an international expert in

the field of glycobiochemistry who has mentored more than 130 trainees throughout his career, many of whom are leaders in American medicine today. This type of accomplishment is one of the most important legacies an academician can leave to the field of medicine.

GARY D. WU  
*Co-Senior Associate Editor*

---

doi:10.1053/j.gastro.2006.06.019