This issue addresses a topic of considerable interest and concern to the National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute (NHLBI): the participation of women in biomedical research careers. Although the proportion of scientists who are women has increased over the years, it is clear that women still lag behind their male counterparts in attaining positions of scientific leadership. Moreover, the current underrepresentation of women as trainees and, particularly, as preceptors in the institute’s predoctoral and postdoctoral training programs and research career development awards suggests this situation will persist in the future unless specific efforts are made to change it. The NHLBI is now taking a number of steps in that direction.

It seems clear that the historical lack of women in research has created, in a sense, a vicious circle. The relative absence of established women researchers makes it difficult for young women scientists to peer into the future, to see their aspirations mirrored in the accomplishments of their predecessors, and to get the advice and encouragement needed to speed them along the path. This lack of role models and mentors only perpetuates the cycle, as limited numbers of women are inspired to set their sights on a research career and seek the advanced training needed to accomplish it. Thus, it is apparent that we must not only encourage young women to apply for training positions but also encourage women researchers to become involved in the training process.

To that end, we have widely announced our intention to address these objectives in our consideration of competing applications for Institutional National Research Service Award (NRSA) training grants, individual NRSA fellowships, and Career Development Awards (Clinical Investigator Development Awards [CIDA], Research Career Development Awards, and Academic Awards). We want to expand the NHLBI portfolio of NRSA training grants that are directed by women, include women as training faculty, and/or have specific strategies for recruitment of women trainees. With respect to NRSA fellowships, we are encouraging applications submitted by women and those that include women as sponsors. Likewise, we are eager to receive Career Development Award applications submitted by women or having women as mentors. Members of the NHLBI Research Personnel Review Committee, the peer-review group for our training and career development programs, have been instructed to consider these issues in their evaluation of applications. Although such issues will not be a factor in determination of a priority score, an administrative note will be included on the summary statement to guide the institute and its advisory council in making funding decisions.

In addition to providing this strong encouragement to women to become more involved in our training and career development programs, we are taking a number of positive actions to improve opportunities for women in the early stages of their research careers. For instance, current NIH policy limits postdoctoral NRSA support to 3 years, a period that may be insufficient for women who need to take time off for pregnancy or child-rearing. However, with prior approval, the period of support can be extended beyond this limit. The NHLBI routinely approves waivers of the 3-year limitation in cases where such an interruption of training is necessary. Recognizing the difficulties associated with parental demands, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) is currently considering an NRSA parental leave policy that would provide up to 30 days of paid leave for trainees and fellows who need it. This parental leave would be available in addition to the 15 days of sick leave currently provided and would apply to both women and men.

Still other action has been taken with respect to the CIDA guidelines, which currently permit up to a 2-year interruption in the award for the grantee to pursue additional clinical training. The NHLBI will now also allow such an interruption in cases related to pregnancy and child-rearing. Moreover, the institute has adopted a provision that allows CIDA awardees, in exceptional cases, a temporary reduction in their time commitment to the program to devote additional time to personal family matters. Although we cannot award a CIDA for more than 5 years or add new funds to the grant, the institute can administratively extend the time period of the award to accommodate such a reduction in effort. Any accumulated funds accrued during the period of reduced effort can then be used in the extension period. We have revised our guidelines to include a description of the options available to awardees in circumstances where pregnancy and child-rearing are issues.

The institute strongly encourages deans, department chairpersons, grantees, training directors, and young women interested in cardiovascular research to take full advantage of these opportunities and to contribute to this effort by developing creative ways of recruiting, retaining, and supporting women in research. We look forward to the day when many women will not just peer through the looking glass but actually step forward and take their places as full participants in the biomedical research enterprise.
Women in biomedical science. Through the looking glass.

C Lenfant

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