

# CURRENT SCIENCE

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## EDITORIAL

### Supporting retired scientists

The Royal Society recently advertised an interesting scheme – ‘A Scientific Relief Fund’ (*Nature*, 6 May 1999), essentially a benevolent fund for old scientists. While researchers and their families, fallen upon hard times, could seek succour, the notice also offered financial assistance to retired scientists, who wanted to continue their academic activities. Coincidentally, at the same time there appeared the news that Sunil Gavaskar was donating the proceeds of his many awards to a fund which would assist indigent cricketers. This was presumably intended to support the large numbers of ‘reasonable’ players who struggle to eke out an existence as professionals (in a short career span), without making it to the top ranks, where money, sometimes, is more abundant than runs or wickets. Scientists, in our country today are ‘professional’ in that they (like almost all others in government) are paid regular, inflation indexed salaries and are covered by pension schemes, which provide some insurance against penury in old age. No longer are academicians paid much less than everybody else in government, such that a researcher must be financially hard pressed in order to pursue his chosen calling. That privilege is now reserved for artists and authors, until they hit the jackpot, of course.

Not so long ago, college and University teachers were grossly underpaid and covered by retirement plans, which were hardly calculated to be attractive. Now successive Pay Commissions have ensured that individual bank balances are more important than institutional (or indeed governmental) finances, with the result that large numbers of reasonably well paid researchers work in laboratories with little money left over to support academic activities. For a substantial number (unfortunately) of ‘scientists’ this is indeed a comfortable state of affairs. There is a ready-made excuse for non-performance – ‘there are no funds or facilities within the institution for research’. Many government laboratories spend a frightening proportion of their budgets on salaries to pay their staff; they then turn their scientists loose to fend for themselves in competing for

research grants from government funding agencies, which were originally set up to promote scientific activity in the University sector. In putting on a brave face, we are often told that ‘competing for peer reviewed grants is a good thing’ and that the responsibility of national institutions ends with providing salary support (and utilities like power, water and shelter, wherever available).

Returning now to the Royal Society’s benevolent fund, the one conclusion that may be drawn is that Indian scientists who retire nowadays from their positions are unlikely (unless they have been profligate) to be in dire financial straits. What kind of support would then benefit them? Although the age of retirement has been enhanced recently from 60 to 62 years, in many academic institutions (mostly centrally supported), even this age finds many scientists (and others) in the pink of health and energetic enough to resent having been put out to graze. In the United States there is no formal age of retirement in federal institutions and many Universities place no limits on the age of their faculty. They do however, subtly and effectively, induce the non-performers to voluntarily (?) leave; a system that of course, requires that tenure be initially granted after a tough and uncompromising review. Europe still maintains an age of retirement, although it is somewhat higher than in India. There have consequently been instances of superstars of European science, who have moved to the United States in their twilight years.

What inhibits our support of productive scientists even after they formally retire? Our system now suffers from a chronic inability to make credible judgements. Beginning at the start of a scientist’s career, all the way through to retirement, we operate in a wonderland, where no distinctions are made between performers and non-performers, workers and shirkers, honest and dishonest, gifted and mediocre. We therefore find it extraordinarily difficult to make any judgements regarding the selective support of the research of scientists who are intellectually active even when they reach formal

retirement age. With the manpower inputs to scientific institutions diminishing in quantity and quality, it would appear futile to summarily withdraw facilities to the best of our scientists. Unfortunately, every scheme introduced to sustain, scientifically, the more productive individuals has floundered because of our inability to be brutally judgemental. Emeritus scientist schemes are now viewed more in terms of additional financial support as personal honoraria, rather than as a means to facilitate academic activity. This view then results in judgements that are based more on friendships and emotions, than on cold academic calculation. Reemployment schemes at some Universities have been in vogue for many years; these are a poor cover for their real purpose – a blanket enhancement in retirement age, with complete disregard for performance.

The Royal Society's scheme does point to an area where science administrators would do well to ponder. Can separate funding mechanisms be created to provide research support to many active and scholarly 'retired' scientists, which would address the important issue of

research grants rather than honoraria or fellowships. Indeed for both young and old scientists, the government agencies appear to feel that personal payments are a greater inducement to work, than research facilities. Grant mechanisms for 'retired scientists' must necessarily operate significantly more expeditiously than normal. Time is, after all, literally running out. For the researchers who undoubtedly endorse the idea of ever increasing honoraria and salaries, one can only point out that academic research is still a very rare profession, where a practitioner gets paid to do what he or she enjoys. An unfortunate reality in many of our laboratories is an increasing number of scientists who do not seem to enjoy their research, but are blatantly careerists.) More importantly, the researcher is very often his own master. Under these circumstances, would it be so much to ask for a greater emphasis on research support and enhanced facilities for research, even if this comes at some personal cost.

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