

Mentoring – hard and underappreciated but rewarding

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Merriam-Webster (1) defines “mentor” as one who teaches or gives help and advice to a less experienced, often younger, person. Another meaning is a trusted counselor or guide. The word originates from the name of Odysseus’s friend entrusted with the education of his son Telemachus.

Mentoring is important and practically necessary in the formation of the next generation of scientists, medical doctors and other professionals, whose training requires enormous personal and societal investments. Good mentoring makes those investments hugely more productive, while lack of mentoring wastes the most important resource in our modern economy – human capital.

Thus it is important to understand what influences development of mentorship and how to incentivize and support it. In *Understanding wider environmental influences on*

mentoring: Towards an ecological model of mentoring in academic medicine, Dr. Dario Sambunjak outlines “external” – societal and institutional – factors which influence mentoring in academic medicine today (2). As Dr. Sambunjak notes, some external factors are more easily influenced than others. Cultural factors are likely the most powerful influence on development of mentoring relationships, but are the hardest to influence.

Government policies are perhaps the easiest to change, but their effects often don’t produce the desired results. For example, government stipends for research fellows facilitate development of mentorship, but usually lack the necessary feedback to ensure these relationships are productive and not plagued by political favoritism. Perhaps the best way governmental policies can influence mentoring is by enforcing strict scientific and ethical criteria for support of scientists. With an insistence on integrity and quality in government-supported research, the best potential mentors will be recognized and sought out by young researchers. The difficulty here is that objective criteria for quality and integrity remove the power to dispense resources (favors) from officials, which is a very difficult request to make from any government.

Perhaps the most effective way to support mentoring is at the institutional and departmental level. “Soft” approaches may

be the most effective – a department head, who personally mentors junior scientists provides a role model and influences other members of her department to do the same.

Finally, modern psychological research has revealed that humans have evolved as social beings whose happiness derives not from our status or wealth, but from fulfillment of our need for personal relationships (3). An increased emphasis on these findings as a part of general professional education may help motivate accomplished scientists, medical doctors and other professionals to take on the demanding, necessary, and rewarding task of mentoring the next generation of scientists.

Conflict of interest: The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.

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