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Lessons from Two Physician Scientists: Navigating the Transition to Independence

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Transitioning from a postdoctoral position to independence is a complex undertaking that requires careful planning and the support of mentors and mentees alike. While some researchers have experienced a smooth transition, for others, it has been more challenging. In order to gain insight into effectively managing the numerous issues that arise during this period, we turned to Drs. Ross Levine and Aaron Viny, who recently engaged in a webinar discussion with us on their relationship as mentor-mentee and their own experiences transitioning to independence.

Dr. Ross Levine, having completed his MD at Johns Hopkins University, pursued hematology/oncology fellowship and residency at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute before joining Memorial Sloan Kettering in New York City to establish his own lab. Dr. Viny, a physician scientist, earned his MD at Case Western Reserve University, followed by an internal medicine residency at Weill Cornell Medical College, and a hematology/oncology fellowship at Memorial Sloan Kettering where he worked in Dr. Levine's lab. He currently serves as an Assistant Professor at Columbia University, leading his own lab and studying the role of chromatin structure and cohesins in AML.

Dr. Levine emphasized his philosophy on running a lab and mentoring young scientists. He stressed the importance of inclusivity, stating that there is room for everyone to contribute, even in a crowded field, and that open communication and trust are paramount. To illustrate this, he shared his own transition to independence within a seemingly saturated field. While initially working on a different topic, he made a strategic decision to “pivot” to epigenetic mechanisms in Acute Myeloid Leukemia (AML) and TET2 mutations, which were relatively unknown at the time. Driven by his passion for cancer epigenetics and mechanistic biology, he explained that when the right opportunity arises, it becomes apparent. Additionally, he emphasized the significance of having thought partners. These thought partners can be your mentees and postdocs in the lab, who will eventually grow and become more independent. Once they reach that point, Dr. Levine openly discusses various options with trainees and works together to decide which projects they can take with them to establish their own labs. His approach is refreshingly honest and generous, he believes that there will always be other avenues to explore, characteristically saying that “he’ll find something else to do”. At the same time, he points out that not all mentors take this approach for various reasons.

From Dr. Viny's perspective, he expressed gratitude for his mentor's enthusiasm and support throughout his postdoctoral training. The lab's encouraging environment, combined with Dr. Levine's desire for his mentees' success, played pivotal roles in a productive postdoc experience and a smooth transition to independence. They both emphasized the importance of transparency and respect in the transition process. Dr. Viny also shared his “pivot” moment, seeing previously uncharacterized opportunity to study the role of cohesins in AML, creating his own research niche within the lab.

For Dr. Levine, mentoring is a rewarding experience, emphasizing the collective nature of success over individual achievements. He takes great pride in the accomplishments of the researchers he has trained and the impact they have made. He strongly believes that sharing projects, knowledge and collaboration does not hinder progress. What was clear from this discussion is that trainees need to pick their postdoc mentors very carefully and Dr. Levine's honest and supportive approach resonated strongly with the audience of new and junior investigators! The message we were left with was that if we are enthusiastic about our research and focus on the primary goals of curing disease, while ignoring personal accolades, we create a supportive environment that nurtures new investigators, who will continue to be good mentors to the next generation of scientists.

While this blog post captures the key messages, we would encourage readers to watch the webinar recording available free to all ISEH members to learn more about the importance of mentorship.

Blog post contributed by George Souroullas and Nick Van Gastel from the ISEH Junior Faculty Committee

Career Development Junior Faculty