

National Institutes of Health



Visiting Fellows Committee

# NIH VFC Newsletter 2014 Spring Edition

## Contributing to global science development by building careers

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## Career Advice

# The K99/R00 Pathway to Independence Award

*Applying for an NIH Career Transition Award*

By Christine C. Jao, PhD

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The K99/R00 Pathway to Independence Award is one of the Career Development Awards offered by the NIH, and is open to all postdocs, regardless of citizenship. The only requirement is for awardees to establish their research programs in US institutions. This grant was established to assist postdocs in their transition to an independent research position, and get them ready to apply for their first R01 grant. There is a mentored portion of one-to-two years (K99) wherein awardees obtain additional training in research and career development in their postdoc lab while at the same time also searching for permanent research positions. The R00 portion of the grant is activated when awardees obtain a position in a research university to establish their independent research program, and provides up to three years of funding. In the current tight funding climate, an awardee will be very attractive in the job market.

As we all know, timing is very important in research. According to Dr. Sharon Milgram, director of the Office of Intramural Research and Education (OITE), in an effort to lower the average age of first time R01 recipients, currently 42 years old, the NIH issued new guidelines. Applicants for the K99/R00 award must be no more than four years post-PhD at the time of first submission, or resubmission. Members of the study section are aware of this change, and more weight is carried by publications from graduate school, than during postdoc research. This change accelerates the timeline for postdocs who wish to apply for this award.

Having just gone through applying for the K99/R00 award, I would like to offer a few tips for postdocs interested in applying for this award. The best tip is to start the process early, as much as one year before you plan to apply for the award. Talking with your mentor early in your tenure at the NIH is very important. Having an open relationship with your mentor is key to obtaining their commitment and support in your career development. Ideally, postdocs apply for the K99/R00 award at the end of their second year, or in their third year. After discussing the research plan with your mentor, contact the NIH Institute and Center (IC) where you plan to submit your application to inquire about the suitability of your research program to the goals of the IC. Another IC may be a better fit for your research plan and goals.

Writing the research plan will take several months, so plan accordingly. The OITE has online resources on grant writing. Individual ICs also hold grant writing workshops. Take these workshops early, preferably in your first or second year of postdoc training. The career development aspect of this award is a very important component of the application, and members of study sections expect to see well-developed career development plans formulated with supportive mentors. If you know postdocs who have successfully received funding for their K99/R00 application, ask to see their proposals.

A few months before the deadline (three to four months), find the Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA), and download the latest application form. Make sure you are using the most up-to-date application form. Contact your IC and inquire if they have a current Grants.gov account. If their Grants.gov account is not current, it may take several weeks to activate the account so inquiring early will give your IC enough time to update their account. In addition, your IC will need to register an Electronic Research Administration (eRA) Commons account for you. The eRA Commons site is where you can access administrative information about grants. It is also

where your letters of reference will be submitted by your referees. The application requires at least three letters of reference. Ask your referees at least one month before the grant due date, and provide them with the necessary information to upload their letters. You will need to obtain two letters from your IC as part of your application: institutional commitment and institutional environment. Submit your application package to your IC at least two weeks before the due date to allow your scientific director time to read your application, and provide you with the necessary letters. Lastly, if you can, upload your application a week before the due date. This will give you time to correct any errors in your application, and seek assistance, if needed. After successfully uploading your application, you can produce a sigh of relief. The most important aspect of applying for any grant is to start the process early.

Some useful websites:

[https://www.training.nih.gov/events/view/2/1008/Grant\\_Writing\\_101](https://www.training.nih.gov/events/view/2/1008/Grant_Writing_101) (videocast of Grant Writing 101)

[http://grants1.nih.gov/grants/guide/contacts/parent\\_K99\\_R00.html](http://grants1.nih.gov/grants/guide/contacts/parent_K99_R00.html) (table of IC specific requirements and contacts)

<http://www.grants.gov/web/grants/applicants/apply-for-grants.html> (applying for grants at the NIH)

[https://www.training.nih.gov/events/view/2/640/K99/R00\\_Grants](https://www.training.nih.gov/events/view/2/640/K99/R00_Grants) (videocast of a 2012 workshop on K99/R00)

## Science Voices from Home Applying for an Academic Position in France

By Delphine Quénet, PhD

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Applying for an academic position in the US and/or abroad can be a difficult process. Frustration is easy as each country has its own rules, terminology, and timing. Last December, Dr. Thierry Galli (deputy director of Multi-Agency Thematic Institute (ITMO), Cell Biology Development and Evolution, Aviesan) and Dr. Mireille Guyader (director Inserm, US office) gave an overview of the research possibilities in the two main French research institutes: CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, <http://www.cnrs.fr/index.php>) and Inserm (Institut National de la Santé et de la Recherche Médicale, <http://english.inserm.fr/>).

The 2014 recruitment season for researchers ended last January. Around 440 positions for research directors (“directeurs de recherche de 2e classe”) and research associates (“chargés de recherche de 1re ou 2e classe”) in biology, chemistry and physics opened. The number of positions varied from one specialty to another one. For example, this year, 19 researchers will be hired in cell biology, development and evolution.

The CNRS and Inserm also joined their efforts merging the Action Thématique et Initiative sur Programme (ATIP) and Avenir programs in 2009 for those who want to start their own group (<http://www.aviesan.fr/en/aviesan/home/aviesan-news/atip-avenir-programme-2013>). This merged program is open to any scientist who has defended his/her PhD within the last 10 years. Awardees receive an annual grant of €60,000/annum for three years that may be extended for an additional two years, a two-year salary for a postdoctoral fellow, a lab space (approximately 550 square feet), and a salary. Half of the latest ATIP-Avenir laureates have obtained a European Research Council (ERC) grant before the end of their contract, and 95 percent are recruited on a tenure

position either at the CNRS or Inserm within two years.

A third option is to go back to France as a postdoctoral fellow. Several grants, such as the Marie Curie Action Intra-European Fellowships (IEF) or the “Programme Retour Post-Doctorants de l’Agence Nationale de la Recherche” (ANR PDOC), are designed for this type of position. However, this decision should be made carefully. The Law Sauvadet limits to a maximum of six years any contract with governmental research institutes. Still, after three years, only researchers with a real chance to obtain a tenure position are renewed. Consequently, your post-doctoral position has to be performed in a laboratory where your chances of being recruited are the highest. Performing a postdoc in France does not increase your chance of being recruited. For Thierry Galli, if you are doing well in your laboratory in the US, the best plan is to produce high-level publications and apply with a solid track record.

So, what is the best advice for a successful application? For Galli, there are no general rules. The most important factor is to have a good strategy that will convince the jury. Indeed, applying is not only about the application *per se*, it is a long journey, which starts during your post-doc. Here are several pieces of advice:

- Build your resume with skills and papers in peer-review journals (it does not mean necessarily Nature or Science only) and highlight your domain of excellence.

- Define your research proposal and keep in mind one major aspect is its feasibility.

- Select the best environment (core facilities, people) which will bring success to your future project.

- Make contact with the laboratory of interest and organize meetings (face-to-face, phone, or video) to know the people, their interests in your project, and their willingness to open a position for you. If your application is selected, you will be invited to give a talk in front of a jury. Both the CNRS and Inserm are working on coordinating these

interviews. But, Galli stresses that face-to-face interviews and meetings with the laboratory where you are applying can be a critical part of your success.

- Define your needs to negotiate your package and apply to starting grants (e.g., “programme Jeunes Chercheuses Jeunes Chercheurs” (ANR JCJC)) at the same time that you submit your application. ATIP-Avenir offers a predefined package; however, you may also apply to private institutes, including the Institut Curie (<http://curie.fr/en>) and the Institut Pasteur (<http://www.pasteur.fr/en>), where it is possible to negotiate a package.

The next season for CNRS and Inserm recruitment starts in December 2014 and for ATIP-Avenir in October 2014. Now is the time to establish your strategy and begin your application. Dr. Galli and Dr. Guyader are here for you, please contact them if you have questions or need help. “Bonne chance\*”.

\*Good luck

Contact information:

Dr. Galli, deputy director, ITMO Cell Biology Development and Evolution

E-mail: [thierry.galli@aviesan.fr](mailto:thierry.galli@aviesan.fr)

Dr. Guyader, director, INSERM-USA office

E-mail: [inserm-usa@ambascience-usa.org](mailto:inserm-usa@ambascience-usa.org)

# Science Voices from Home Science and Biotech in Australia

*Sun, Surf, and Science*

By Kevin Ramkissoon, PhD

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As part of its ongoing Science Voices from Home seminar series, the Visiting Fellows Committee hosted Dr. Ralf Brandt, managing director and CEO at Melbourne based vivoPharm Pty Ltd., on February 26, 2014 to learn about career opportunities in the Australian biotechnology sector.

Dr. Ralf Brandt, a former NIH postdoctoral Fogarty fellow at the NCI, founded vivoPharm, a Melbourne-based contract research organization, in 2003. In the decade since, vivoPharm has grown rapidly and today stands as one of many successful companies that comprise the Australian biotech industry.

Far more than just the home of the kangaroo, koala, and the dominating Aussie cricket team, Australia has become a major player in the global biotechnology industry with over 500 biotech businesses employing more than seven hundred thousand people. Today it stands alongside countries like the United States, Germany, and the United Kingdom, as one of the largest biotech markets in the world. The success of the Australian biotechnology sector can be attributed to a number of factors. Foremost amongst these, according to Brandt, are a strong university and medical research base, excellent financial and legislative support, and a close proximity to rapidly growing Asian-Pacific markets.

Despite having a population of only twenty-three million – less than 1/10<sup>th</sup> that of the United States – Australia's high urbanization, low competition, and business-friendly policies have proven tremendously attractive to international biotechnology companies. A proportionally large number of PhD level graduates in biotechnology-related disciplines have served as a valuable

resource to both established companies and biotech startups. This highly skilled workforce is the result of a strong university and medical research system, which encompasses 39 universities and areas of excellence that include oncology, immunology, cardiovascular medicine, medical physiology, and the pharmaceutical and clinical sciences.

Major initiatives by the Australian government and the Australian Research Council have resulted in 44 active Cooperative Research Centers, 20 percent of which are involved in health and biotech. Other organizations such as Commercialization Australia and Austrade help to foster international partnerships between pharma and academic institutions worldwide by providing grants, helping identify research partnership opportunities, finding paths to market, and accelerating commercialization. This promotes a vibrant international scientific environment and should help allay any concerns that a move to the land down under would negatively impact scientific visibility or research networks already established here in the US.

High in resources and relatively low on debt, Australia is a wealthy country with a market economy that has taken full advantage of global opportunities in the biotech sector. Gross expenditure on research and development reached US\$935 billion in 2013, accounting for 2.3 percent of gross domestic product - for comparison, that number was 2.6 percent in the US. A stable political environment, strong government investment, and industry-friendly business policies have gained Australia a reputation as one of the easiest places in the world to do business. Robust intellectual property protections and significant tax incentives that encourage companies to engage in R&D have also helped boost private and public confidence and investment in the biotechnology sector. All of this has proven attractive to global biotech players such as Eli Lilly, Qiagen, Roche, and Merck, which all have a presence in Australia, either directly or through partnerships.

Pursuit of a research career in Australia would place one in the Asian-Pacific region in the midst

of what has been called the Asian Century – the epitome of being in the right place at the right time! The strong economic growth and increasing global scientific leadership in nearby countries help provide a measure of stability and ample opportunities for growth and expansion for Australian biotechnology companies. One can easily imagine the impact of such an environment on factors such as job security and opportunities for vertical or lateral career movement, important considerations for many postdocs seeking their first job.

But there's more to life than just work. Australian cities are world-renowned centers for art, culture, and active outdoor lifestyles with Melbourne, Sydney, Perth, and Adelaide perennially listed among the best cities in which to live worldwide. One big reason is the Australian weather... or more appropriately *weathers*. Thanks to its large size, Australia's climate varies widely allowing for spectacular natural phenomena such as the Great Barrier Reef and the great Australian Outback. Whether it is the sub-tropical north, semi-arid desert interior, or the mild seasons experienced in the temperate southeast, residents can choose their comfort zone. Brandt's picks – the Australian states of New South Wales and Victoria, partly for their temperate climate, but largely for their strong state support for the local biotech scene.

Ultimately, whether it is the sun, surf, or science that proves most attractive, Australia is worthy of consideration by NIH fellows as a destination for furthering their scientific careers.

Informative links:

Australian Research Council:  
<http://www.arc.gov.au/>

Australian State Government: <http://www.gov.au/>

Austrade: <http://www.austrade.gov.au/>

## VFC-Brown Bag Series III Dealing with the Unexpected

By Christelle de Renty, PhD and  
Masfique Mehedi, PhD

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The NIH Visiting Fellows Committee's Brown Bag Series organizes informational seminars to address issues and resources relevant to visiting fellows. Two previous sessions focused on immigration (April 2013) and on international funding opportunities (June 2013). This session of the series (December 2013) focused on four resources available to fellows to help navigate unexpected circumstances that can occur in, or affect, the workplace.

This session hosted representatives from four different and important NIH resources designed to assist fellows: the Office of the Ombudsman, the Employee Assistance Program, the Civil Program at the NIH Office of Human Resources, and the Office of Intramural Training and Education. These programs offer a wide variety of assistance for all NIH employees (including fellows) to address issues in the workplace or at home and to improve our personal and professional well-being. The session started with a quick overview of the four specific offices and was followed with a more detailed presentation by a representative from each program.

The NIH Office of the Ombudsman, Center for Cooperative Resolution (OO/CCR), represented by Samantha Levine-Finley, is a resource for all NIH employees (including fellows) to address any workplace question. Ombudsmen are independent, neutral individuals who assist in addressing concerns and resolving conflicts. They work confidentially and will not share information without an individual's knowledge and consent. They rely on a voluntary approach and do not require anyone to follow their recommendations. The ombudsman will listen to concerns, help identify needs and clarify desired outcomes, explore and evaluate options, and facilitate

understanding and resolution of a claim. These individuals can provide coaching and can serve as mediator or facilitator in conflict resolution, with the help of scientific consultants, if needed. They are also available to conduct presentations at staff meetings, briefings, and training sessions. The Ombudsman's office is located in Building 31, Room 2B63 and can be contacted in person, by telephone (301-594-7231) or by email ([ombudsman@mail.nih.gov](mailto:ombudsman@mail.nih.gov)).

Eva Chen presented the NIH Employee Assistance Program (EAP). The EAP provides professional consultation, short-term counseling, referral and follow-up services for any individual, family or work issue impacting personal or professional wellness. EAP staff consists of neutral social workers and professional counselors. They can assist employees in addressing various issues such as life transition stress, work-related issues, interpersonal conflicts, financial difficulties, health issues, or substance abuse. This free program is available to all NIH employees (including fellows) and their immediate family members. EAP services are strictly confidential and are based on a voluntary approach. The EAP also organizes workshops on stress management, work/life balance, and workplace communication. The EAP office is located in Building 31, Room B2B57 and can be reached at 301-496-3164.

Jessica Hawkins, of the Office of Human Resources, then spoke about the NIH Civil Program. The Civil Program is comprised of a team of NIH experts that help to prevent workplace violence through policy development, education, assessment, and response to violent or potentially violent incidents. This program coordinates different NIH resources to address threats and actual acts of violence in the workplace. It can also respond to cases of intimidating or harassing behavior. The Civil Program is part of the Office of Human Resources and is not confidential. They will work with the Institute's Executive Officer and involved supervisors to resolve problems. The Civil program can be reached at 301-402-4845.

Finally, Julie Gold presented some of the resources available at the Office of Intramural Training and Education (OITE), which are designed exclusively for fellows. The OITE provides different types of support such as career counseling, stress management, informal US culture discussions, and English classes for non-native speakers. Workshops on workplace dynamics, assertiveness, and career-guidance are also regularly organized. The OITE is located in Building 2 and Julie Gold can be reached at [goldje@mail.nih.gov](mailto:goldje@mail.nih.gov).

This very informative Brown Bag Series session ended with some Q&A and open discussion. The speakers strongly encouraged contacting their services early and whenever needed. All the offices work together and would be able to redirect to the relevant service so one does not need to know exactly which specific office to contact. It is better to act sooner than letting a situation deteriorate.

Additional information on the various programs can be found on the following websites:

Office of the Ombudsman: <http://ombudsman.nih.gov>

EAP: <http://www.ors.od.nih.gov/sr/dohs/EAP>

Civil program: <http://civil.nih.gov>

OITE: <https://www.training.nih.gov/services>

The slides from the presenters are available at: [https://www.training.nih.gov/attachments/att52ab57175dc8c/VFC\\_Brown\\_Bag\\_12-12-2013.pdf](https://www.training.nih.gov/attachments/att52ab57175dc8c/VFC_Brown_Bag_12-12-2013.pdf)

For further information on the VFC-Brown Bag Series and the upcoming sessions/topics, please visit us online at [https://www.training.nih.gov/vfc\\_brown\\_bag\\_series](https://www.training.nih.gov/vfc_brown_bag_series) or contact Masfique Mehedi at [masfique.mehedi@nih.gov](mailto:masfique.mehedi@nih.gov).

# Research Tools

## The CCR Initiative in RNA Biology

*A Good Opportunity for Fellows*

By Delphine Quénet, PhD

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The National Institutes of Health (NIH) abound in initiatives and scientific interest groups (SIGs, <http://www.nih.gov/sigs/>). Recently, a steering committee composed of NCI Principal Investigators Drs. Susan Gottesman, Stephen Hughes, Javed Khan, Stuart LeGrice, Tom Misteli, Jeffrey Strathern, Yun-xing Wang, Zhi-Ming Zheng, and Joseph Ziegelbauer created the Center for Cancer Research (CCR) Initiative for RNA Biology. This group organizes researchers in the RNA community that work on all aspects of RNA biology (e.g., transcription, processing, RNA structure, non-coding RNA (ncRNA), RNA-based and RNA-targeted therapies) within the National Cancer Institute (NCI). I had a chance to interview (by e-mail) Dr. Tom Misteli about this Initiative.

### **What is the goal of the CCR Initiative for RNA Biology?**

The goal of the CCR Initiative in RNA Biology is to create a strong RNA community at the NCI. There are many groups within the NCI that work on RNA, but many are dispersed throughout numerous laboratories and locations. The RNA Initiative is a way to bring RNA biologists together to facilitate interactions and create synergies. One of the most important goals of the initiative is to involve postdoctoral fellows in the larger community. One way to accomplish this is to hold workshops specifically aimed at fellows, where they can present their work to their NCI colleagues. These workshops also provide fellows an opportunity to interact with prominent NCI and extramural principal investigators (PIs) in a causal atmosphere.

### **What are the organizational structure of this group and the frequency of the workshops?**

The organizational structure is flat to encourage community input. The activities of the RNA Initiative are coordinated by a nine-member steering committee composed of CCR PIs. However, all members have direct input. An important piece of the Initiative is a dynamic, interactive Wiki site where any member can start a discussion, communicate their ideas and suggestions and interact with other members. To bring the community together, the Initiative plans to organize two to three workshops per year. These workshops will all be held at the Shady Grove location, conveniently located between the Bethesda and Frederick campuses. A major international symposium devoted to RNA biology featuring some of the biggest names in the field, including Phil Sharp, Jennifer Doudna, and John Rinn, is planned for the early spring of 2015 in Bethesda.

### **Is it limited to CCR researchers?**

The Initiative focuses on CCR scientists, and the goal is to build a strong CCR community of RNA biologists, but anyone interested in RNA is welcome. The Initiative is an ideal way for the CCR RNA community to reach out to our colleagues in other NIH institutes and the extramural RNA community.

### **What are the benefits for fellows?**

To re-iterate, fellows are, in many ways, the most important target group for the Initiative. We want fellows to be actively involved in the Initiative and the RNA community. The workshops will provide a venue for fellows with shared interests in RNA biology to meet each other and to interact in an informal setting with PIs and other leaders in the field. Each workshop will feature several fellow presentations, and give fellows a chance to present their work in a formal, yet friendly environment. We also hope that fellows will take advantage of the Wiki site, for example, to find reagents or discuss technical problems with their CCR colleagues.

### **Is RNA biology the “new Holy Grail” after the Human Genome Project?**

There is no doubt that RNA biology is one of the most exciting and prominent areas of molecular biology. Some of the most remarkable and impactful discoveries in all of biology in the last few decades have been in the area of RNA biology; RNA interference and ncRNA are just two examples. What makes the field so exciting is that there is still much that we do not know, including the tremendous, largely unexplored, potential for practical applications in the clinic. It is also fair to say that RNA biology has some relevance to almost anyone doing molecular biology research. There is something for everyone!

**Do you have an additional message about this Initiative that you would like to share?**

RNA biology is an incredibly exciting field with much potential. Building a strong RNA community at the NCI is essential to fully explore the promises in the RNA field. It is important that the Initiative is not exclusively driven by PIs, but that fellows are actively involved. They are the future of the field and we want their input in shaping the future of RNA biology in the CCR.

Please note on your agenda, the next CCR RNA Biology Workshop is April 23 (Shady Grove Campus). For conference related questions, you may contact Brenda Boersma-Maland ([boersmab@mail.nih.gov](mailto:boersmab@mail.nih.gov)).

## NEI Postdocs' Research Festival

### Focus on Fellows

By Ping Chen, MD, PhD

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*Focus on Fellows* is a very special event for the National Eye Institute (NEI) postdoc fellows. It started in 2007 when previous deputy director Dr. Sarah Sohraby initiated this event. In brief, the NEI scientific director's office hosts the annual *Focus on Fellows* event, designed to stimulate scientific exchange and career development for trainees. The trainees also have the opportunity to

interact with NEI staff and alumni to discuss career opportunities in academia, industry, and government, as well as various topics in vision research.

This event is hosted every year in October at the Twinbrook campus of the NIH because the NEI office wants postdocs and other trainees to leave the labs and enjoy this special event and be away from the bench. Postdocs and other trainees are involved in organizing the meeting, presenting data, interacting with people, and discussing research topics. To encourage questions from trainees, postdocs are also given the priority when asking questions during seminars.

The NEI has hosted the *Focus on Fellows* event for seven years. Why does the NEI office organize this event for our postdocs as part of the training program? We usually have doctoral training around five years before becoming postdocs, so we have done a lot of work at the bench. Postdocs spend the majority of time in the lab, doing literature searches and experiments. We have little time to develop networking and other scientific skills. However, we do need different skills for our future jobs after finishing our postdoc training. Working at the bench is important but other scientific and social skills are also required. Therefore, the NEI office has initiated the *Focus on Fellows* to provide the different training opportunities for postdocs. Meanwhile, mentors and PIs support the postdocs to leave their labs to attend this event and they even participate in the event as well.

What do postdocs learn from the *Focus on Fellows*? We have learned how to ask scientific questions, how to present research projects, how to conquer the nervousness during presentation, and be inspired from the stories of successful scientists. For example, I was one of the moderators for the event last year, which turned out to be a very positive experience for me. The experience in *Focus on Fellows* gave me the confidence to speak in front of many people. Undoubtedly, public speaking for scientists is an important skill because scientists need to present their research work to the public.

Another significant benefit postdocs have gained from the event is that we meet other postdocs from different labs. Previously, we had few opportunities to meet other postdocs because we work all day long in the labs and the postdocs at the NEI are located in two different buildings. Some of us are in Building 10 and others are in Building 6. The distance makes the interaction with other postdocs challenging. In this event, we stay in the same room and spend the whole day together. The *Focus on Fellows* event provides us a great opportunity to communicate with other NEI postdocs.

*Focus on Fellows* is one of many events for postdoc trainees at the NIH. We are proud of having the special event at the NEI and looking forward to participating again to practice skills for the next step of our careers.

## Culture Corner

### Italians@NIH Group

### Activities

*From Science to Politics with  
Dr. Ignazio Marino, Mayor of Rome*

By Mauro Tiso, PhD and Ilaria  
Tassi, PhD

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On Dec 12, 2013 the NIH community had the honor of hosting the mayor of Rome, Italy, Dr. Ignazio Marino at the Fogarty International Center. Dr. Marino was visiting Washington D.C. during a cultural exchange between the National Gallery of Art and the city of Rome.

The NIH campus is home to more than 200 Italians, including visiting and research fellows, principal investigators, and extramural personnel, making Italy the most represented European nation at the NIH. An informal group and mailing list called Italians@NIH was first established in 2012 with the goal of promoting scientific collaboration, science diffusion, network building, and career

development among Italians. It has established an ongoing close relationship with the scientific attaché of the Italian Embassy in Washington DC, Dr. Ranieri Guerra, which allows Italians@NIH to be constantly informed about grants, fellowships, and other sources of research funding that are released by the Italian government and the European Union. In virtue of this collaboration, Italians@NIH was very pleased to host Dr. Marino at the NIH for a discussion about “*Italian brain drain; career opportunities in Italian universities and biomedical institutes sited in Rome*” and thanks Dr. Guerra in particular for providing the opportunity to meet a person with such an interesting pathway into politics.

Before being elected to the Italian senate in 2006, Dr. Marino trained as a physician and built his scientific experience in the US, spending many years as a surgeon and medical researcher in Pittsburgh under the leadership of Dr. Thomas Starzl, the pioneer of human liver transplants. Marino then became professor of surgery at the University of Pittsburgh (and later on at the Thomas Jefferson University in Philadelphia) and in the late '90s, he was instrumental in the creation of a modern transplant center in Palermo, Sicily, the “Istituto Mediterraneo per i Trapianti e Terapie ad Alta Specializzazione” (ISMETT). He eventually returned to Italy to lead the center until 2002. As a senator, he was elected president of the Italian Senate Health Commission. His unusual path to politics has made him an uncommon politician. For example, as mayor of Rome, he rides his bicycle around the city accompanied by bike-riding policemen, instead of using cars!

After a welcome introduction by Fogarty International Center representative George Herrfurth and a brief presentation by Dr. Marino, a question/answer session started. Dr. Marino was first asked about how he imported his “American experience” into Italian reality. He described that he convinced most of his surgical team in Pittsburgh (about 30 people) to move to Palermo and was able to perform the first liver transplant in a new surgical operating room in less than two months. However, he was constantly struggling with the Italian bureaucratic and political system

and remembered that, when in 2001 he performed kidney transplantation in an HIV-infected child, a first in Italy, some political parties heavily criticized him despite the clinical success. Indeed, before that in Italy, a person affected by HIV would never have had the hope to be in the national health system's waiting list for transplantation and the health minister at the time ordered an inspection of the ISMETT transplant center.

This episode sparked his interest in politics and he explained how, during his activity as senator, he firmly advocated for the application of transparency and meritocracy in Italian academia, strongly supporting the peer review criteria for hiring and financing investigators.

He was then asked about systemic differences in hiring scientists and researchers in Italy versus in the US. He explained that based on the Italian constitution, any public institution or university has the duty to open a public competition ("concorso") when selecting candidates for a new position. Despite this requirement, he is fully committed to blocking the corruption that often affects the results of these public competitions.

Dr. Marino welcomed the idea of more direct interaction between the many scientific institutions in Rome and the Italian scientists at the NIH, in particular inviting NIH researchers, even at their early career stage, to participate in seminars or symposia. As mayor of Rome, he is fully committed to improving scientific education and promoting research and innovation, even assisting Italian scientists working abroad in applying for positions in biomedical institutes and universities sited in Rome.

Besides the event with Dr. Marino, the Italians@NIH group recently inaugurated the Italians at NIH Lecture Series. In the first lecture on drug and alcohol addiction, we hosted Dr. Antonello Bonci, scientific director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), and Dr. Lorenzo Leggio of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) & NIDA. The next seminar will be held on April 23 and will focus on tumor immunology with

speakers from the National Cancer Institute (NCI): Drs. Giorgio Trinchieri, Amiran Dzutsev, and Luca Gattinoni.

## Culture Corner

# Notes from an Informal Discussion about US Culture

By Amie D. Moody, PhD

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"Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore." The line is spoken by Dorothy in the 1939 classic movie *The Wizard of Oz*, when she wakes up in a strange, colorful world instead of the middle of Kansas with its familiar flat, plain farm-land as far as the eye can see. Although visiting fellows do not mysteriously wake up one day in the US, I imagine that some of the cultural differences can still be disorienting, and maybe even a little startling. On the first or second Friday of every month, Julie Gold from the Office of Intramural Training and Education (OITE) hosts an informal discussion about US culture. I had the opportunity to attend one recently where we discussed tipping people in various service industries and the intricacies of greeting people.

In the US, there are many types of services where the issue of tipping comes into play. The most common occurrence is in the dining industry (restaurants, bars, and food delivery). Unlike in European cultures, the majority of US servers are not paid the federal minimum wage and the majority, if not all, of their after-tax earnings comes from tips. A typical tip is 15-20 percent of the pre-tax bill total; although, speaking as a former server, 18-20 percent is expected for good service. When ordering delivery, it is also worth noting that in most cases any included delivery charge does not go to the driver, so you should still tip him/her for the delivery! Taxi drivers are another example of service industry workers who depend on tips for a significant portion of their

income. In these cases, the tip is 10-15 percent of the cab fare.

There are more ambiguous occasions for tipping where the rules are not as well defined. For example, if you have furniture delivered to your home/apartment, it is customary to tip the delivery people. The amount is subjective and depends on the effort they expend to do so. If they have to move a large sectional couch up three flights of stairs in 80°F temperatures, you might give them \$20 and a glass of water. But if they are just dropping off a few end tables to the front door of your home, you may tip as little as \$5. For any occasion, when in doubt, one can always check the Internet to gauge what is considered a “normal” tip for your location.

The interesting things that I learned came in the second half of the discussion when the question of how to respond when asked “How are you?” was raised. As someone born in the US, I have never given a second thought to this salutation. The gentleman that posed the question, however, was unsure how detailed an answer the inquiry required, especially when posed by a relative stranger. In most cases, it is really just meant to be a greeting, similar to “Hello” or “Good morning,” a friendly acknowledgement that you are there. So unless it is a friend or coworker asking, the inquiring party is not expecting a full conversation in reply, merely something like, “I’m good. How are you?”

Finally, our last point of discussion focused on one gentleman’s surprise that not everyone says hello upon arrival to the laboratory/office. He was used to everyone always acknowledging others with a greeting, and was not sure if it was a personal or a cultural phenomenon in his new workplace. We discussed that although every work place is different, often a person just arriving to work may not want to disturb someone already there if they look busy, so will chose not to greet them until later.

These are just the highlights of the cultural discussion that I attended. If you are interested in attending future discussions, please follow the “Upcoming Events” page on the OITE website:

<https://www.training.nih.gov/events/upcoming>.

Although Julie chooses a theme for each discussion, tipping being the topic this particular afternoon, other questions about vocabulary, idioms, and pronunciation are always welcome and encouraged. All are welcome to attend and share their thoughts and experiences!

## VFC Newsletter Staff

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Dr. Anne Miermont, *Managing Editor*  
[miermonteltejam@mail.nih.gov](mailto:miermonteltejam@mail.nih.gov)

Dr. Vania Cao  
[caova@mail.nih.gov](mailto:caova@mail.nih.gov)

Dr. Ping Chen  
[ping.chen2@nih.gov](mailto:ping.chen2@nih.gov)

Dr. Christelle de Renty  
[derentycm@mail.nih.gov](mailto:derentycm@mail.nih.gov)

Dr. Patricia Forcinito  
[forcinitop@mail.nih.gov](mailto:forcinitop@mail.nih.gov)

Erika Ginsburg  
[ginsbure@mail.nih.gov](mailto:ginsbure@mail.nih.gov)

Dr. Christine Jao  
[jaocc@mail.nih.gov](mailto:jaocc@mail.nih.gov)

Dr. Khyati Kapoor  
[kapoork2@mail.nih.gov](mailto:kapoork2@mail.nih.gov)

Dr. Tania Lombo  
[rodrigueztl@mail.nih.gov](mailto:rodrigueztl@mail.nih.gov)

Dr. Masfique Mehedi  
[mehedim@mail.nih.gov](mailto:mehedim@mail.nih.gov)

Dr. Amie Moody  
[moodyad@mail.nih.gov](mailto:moodyad@mail.nih.gov)

Dr. Delphine Quénet  
[quenetdc@mail.nih.gov](mailto:quenetdc@mail.nih.gov)

Dr. Kevin Ramkissoon  
[kevin.ramkissoon@nih.gov](mailto:kevin.ramkissoon@nih.gov)

Dr. Urvashi Ramphul  
[urvashi.ramphul@nih.gov](mailto:urvashi.ramphul@nih.gov)

Dr. Jaime Smith  
[smithjai@mail.nih.gov](mailto:smithjai@mail.nih.gov)

Dr. Illaria Tassi  
[tassii@mail.nih.gov](mailto:tassii@mail.nih.gov)

Dr. Mauro Tiso  
[tisom@mail.nih.gov](mailto:tisom@mail.nih.gov)

Dr. Shawn Mullen, *Advisor*  
[mullensh@mail.nih.gov](mailto:mullensh@mail.nih.gov)

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Dr. Jithesh Velichamthotu Veetil, *VFC Co-Chair*  
[velichamthotuj@mail.nih.gov](mailto:velichamthotuj@mail.nih.gov)

Dr. David Sanchez-Martin, *VFC Co-Chair*  
[sanchezmartind@mail.nih.gov](mailto:sanchezmartind@mail.nih.gov)

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