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Day in the life

...of a postdoc

Living a mere 2-minute walk from work allows me the luxury of lying in bed until 8.00 am every morning. After a leisurely shower and breakfast in front of the TV, I take the short walk into work, arriving just before 9.00 am. Work is at the Institute of Arable Crops Research at Rothamsted near Harpenden, where approximately 400 scientists and support staff work together with the objective of achieving improvements in rural and agricultural economies that are financially, environmentally and socially sustainable.

The first thing on today's agenda is a lab meeting. The occurrence of these varies depending upon who is around, but generally we all get together about once a month. 'We' currently comprises of a group of eight scientists: a group head, four postdocs (including me), one PhD student, one technician and a visiting research fellow from China. Today's lab meeting is primarily to introduce the Chinese research fellow into the group and once these formalities are over (and a spicy sausage from France consumed) we move on to the science. The group I work in focuses on the understanding and manipulation of nutrient acquisition by plants. My project is a continuation of an existing post; a Realising Our Potential Award project that had 6 months' funding remaining and aims to examine the



by **Donna Brown**
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effect of soil mechanical impedance on rice gene expression.

At 11.00 am, the lab meeting is finished and it's time for coffee. Most days I'll pop over to the canteen for a cup of tea and a bun, and to catch up with friends that work in other groups/departments. Today however, I need to forgo coffee and make a start on my lab work. Grabbing my lab book from the office I share with one of the other postdocs, I walk to the lab, don my lab coat and make a start. Friends often ask me what I could

possibly do in a lab all day and I find it quite hard to explain. What do I do? As a molecular biologist I spend a significant amount of time preparing and analysing RNA and DNA in some way, shape or form. Today, for example, I'm preparing RNA from different tissues so that I can look at expression patterns of specific genes later on in the week.

After running up and down the stairs for what seems like a million times (the -80°C freezer is located in the basement; the lab on the 2nd

Donna's career tips*Entry qualifications:*

A PhD is needed. Your first postdoc provides a great opportunity to change subject fields so have a think about what you really want to do. It gets harder to move as time ticks on.

Career progression:

To reach senior postdoc level takes around 3 years.

Progression after this (to group leader) is fairly limited, at least in academia. If you don't intend on staying in academia, it is often better to undertake your first postdoc in industry.

Salary:

Salary ranges from £20200 up to £27000

Further information:

Send e-mail to Donna

floor), my RNA preps are half-way there and it's time for lunch, which brings a number of options: the gym (perhaps not today), a walk into town (to spend the money one earns as a postdoc!), or lunch at my desk and given those hard-to-shift student-like tendencies I opt for lunch at my desk eating the sandwiches I brought from home. Aside from food, lunch provides the ideal opportunity to write up the details of this morning's meeting and lab work in my lab book; an important part of my work is to keep an accurate and up-to-date account of how I spend my time. I also find time to check my e-mail and aside from the odd message or two from friends, I have various mails from scientific companies informing me of their latest product. Molecular biology is a fast-moving science, and new products are continually brought on to the market and therefore taking the time to speak to reps (who usually offer a discount) about their products is often valuable.

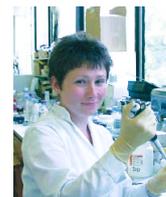
With lunch over it's back in the lab and after retrieving my samples from the -80°C freezer (another dreaded trip into the basement), I finish off my RNA preps. While my gel is setting (made so that I can run out some RNA to check its quality), I start to fill up pipette tip boxes with new tips and magenta boxes with microfuge tubes. A menial task as this may seem, lab duties are essential for the smooth running of the lab and regardless of position everyone mucks in. Once the gel is set, I run out my RNA samples to find that they're okay, and after determining their concentrations, they're ready for analysis later in the week.

Afternoons fly by, especially if I'm in the lab, and looking at my watch I find that it's 4.30 pm. With

only an hour left before work finishes, I sit down in front of my computer and make a start on some sequence analysis; this part of my work is never-ending, the more work I do the more sequence data I have to analyse. At least I'm never short of things to do.

At just after 5.30 pm, I wave to my colleagues as they leave and I sit at my desk to start what I now refer to as my second job. I'm due to start a new postdoc position in August at the Beckman Research Institute, Duarte, CA, USA. I've been offered 1 year's funding which will enable me to make a start on my new project while I write a grant proposal(s) in an attempt to secure further funding. As luck may have it, there is an appropriate body I can apply to before actually starting work and this means collaborating with my new employer to try to put together a proposal. Today's task involves more reading; and lots of it.

At 7.30, my rumbling stomach gets the better of me, I switch off my computer and take the not-so-long walk home.



A four year sandwich degree in microbiology and molecular biology at the Nottingham Trent University led to a PhD at the Institute of Arable Crops Research/ University College London. Her PhD was a molecular-based project focusing on multidrug resistance in wheat, and on the completion of this current short-term post-doc position, Donna is moving to California (Beckman Research Institute, Duarte) to work on multidrug resistance in cancer cells.

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Career tips

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Work out your strengths and weaknesses, and your likes and dislikes

It's self-analysis time, folks! — and honesty needs to come into play here too. Also, ask your friends what *they* think you're good at. Are you really the ace presentation-giver you think you are? Next, match your strengths and likes to some possible career paths. By the way, this isn't something you only do as a student... It's an exercise worth repeating periodically throughout your life.

Photo: Eppendorf