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Why I Am Worried about My Post PhD-degree Life – A Commentary

Jung-Im Shin, MD, MPH

ABSTRACT

Public health is an area where we will always need professionally-prepared people, but despite desperate needs in higher education, some soon-to-graduate PhD students are concerned that there might not be a place for them. Furthermore, some are concerned about balancing school, work, and family life. Perhaps now more than ever public health professional programs and schools need to devote resources toward career counseling and job placement.

I am a physician from South Korea and pursuing a PhD in epidemiology in the Department of Population Health Sciences at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW-Madison). My passion is to help clinicians, policymakers, and patients make well-informed decisions about healthcare. My areas of research interest include comparative effectiveness research, cardiovascular disease, and chronic kidney disease. I envision myself as becoming a teacher and a researcher in an academic setting, either in the U.S., or back in my country, after graduation. Although I have been enjoying coming back to graduate school again to become a better prepared professional in the future, I often have been worried about my post-degree professional life for several reasons.

First, the research environment of biomedical science has been undergoing gradual but constant change in recent decades. Acquiring research funding from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) or other funding agencies is becoming more competitive than it used to be. Although the number of grants awarded by the NIH has not changed much since the late 1990s, the number of applicants has almost doubled during the same time period (National Institutes of Health [NIH], 2013). As a result, the success rate has gone down from above 30% in 1998 to approximately 18% in 2012 (NIH, 2013). To receive funding, a grant proposal needs to be more innovative, either with respect to the research topic, or in regards to its methodological approach. Also, regulatory policies in human research subjects are getting more complex nowadays. Research regulation is absolutely necessary for the protection of human subjects’ rights, but I have heard from many of the professors that sometimes it slows down the proliferation of good research activities. Moreover, expected academic achievement to become an assistant professor in the university is getting higher and gaining tenure may also be more difficult than in former times. I believe these trends in the research environment will continue after I graduate, so it will be challenging to start my professional career as a young scientist.

Second, I am concerned about the future direction of epidemiology and what role I should play to advance clinical epidemiology in particular. Some medical scientists argue that epidemiology is not a concrete science because most of the epidemiologic or observational studies tend to produce biased scientific information in the society (Taubes, 1995). As a PhD student in epidemiology, I agree that randomized clinical trials (RCTs) are the “gold standard” to have a definite answer for many causal questions in medical science. However, RCTs are not always feasible for many reasons, including ethical issues. Nonetheless, I hold a certain skepticism that epidemiology will exist as it does presently when I am early in career.

Finally, I am worried about how to achieve balance between my professional life and family life. I have one child and plan to have another while I am still a student. My husband is also a PhD student in agricultural and applied economics. We were fortunate to have an opportunity to pursue the PhD at the same university. This made our family life much happier. Most likely, my husband will start his professional life earlier than I do, and we would like to live together as a family. Therefore, my possible job opportunities might be geographically limited depending on where my husband finds his professional position. Although my husband and I will make the best choice for both of us, the situation in which my future job exists is not

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entirely under my control, and that fact concerns me. Furthermore, being a successful epidemiologist, and being a good mother and supportive wife at the same time will be the most challenging of assignments. I already have been experiencing the difficulty of being a full-time student, a mother, and a wife at the same time. Having a supportive family is great, but sometimes I would be more productive if I were alone without interruption. I believe balancing between work and family life is going to be even more difficult when I become full-time professional.

In summary, I am a passionate graduate student who wants to become an epidemiologist to help decision-makers make well-informed judgments about healthcare. However, challenges in finding funding to conduct the research, regulatory burdens on human subjects’ research, higher expectations of academic achievement for early career scientists, skepticism about epidemiology, and difficulties in balancing work and family life makes me worried about my future.

REFERENCES


Jung-Im Shin (jshinn44@wisc.edu) is a doctoral student in the epidemiology program, Department of Population Health Sciences, University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health (SMPH). She has an MD degree from the Seoul National University College of Medicine and an MPH from the Johns Hopkins University Bloomberg School of Public Health. This paper was part of an assignment in the SMPH's Public Health Summer Institute course, Writing for Scholarly Publication, July 1-11, 2013. Copyright 2013 by the Florida Public Health Review.