Sex Differences in Institutional Support for Junior Biomedical Researchers

Women are underrepresented in the biomedical research workforce. Only 30% of funded investigators are women.1,2 Junior faculty women have fewer peer-reviewed publications than men3,4 and are more often on clinician-educator (vs traditional) tracks.5 One reason may be differences in early-career institutional support, which to our knowledge has not been previously examined.

Methods | Application data from 2 New England biomedical research programs administered by the Medical Foundation Division of Health Resources in Action were analyzed. One program accepted applicants in a single field of study within 5 years of initial faculty appointment; the second program invited institutions to submit 2 basic science applicants within 2 years of initial appointment.

Data on start-up support provided by the employing institution (ie, salary and other support, including research technicians, equipment, and supplies) from all applications during 2012-2014 were extracted.

We compared support for men and women overall, and by scientific focus, terminal degree, and years since receiving terminal degree. Data concerning age and race were not collected. Publication data were incomplete and not included.

Two analyses were performed to examine associations with institutional characteristics. Applicants were employed by universities, hospitals, and other nonprofit research institutions. As a measure of overall institutional research resources, we stratified the sample by overall institutional funding from the National Institutes of Health (NIH) in fiscal year 2014. We also directly compared support for men and women who applied from the same institution.

Statistical analyses were performed using Epi Info version 7.1.4 (US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention). The P values were calculated using Kruskal-Wallis nonparametric tests (continuous variables), Spearman correlation analysis, or 2-tailed Fisher exact tests (categorical variables).

P < .05 (2-sided) was considered significant. The Hummingbird Institutional Review Board determined that this

Table 1. Characteristics of Men and Women Applying for Early-Career Awardsa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No. (%)b</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>P Valuec</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No. of applicants</td>
<td>219 (100)</td>
<td>127</td>
<td>92</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of degree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MD</td>
<td>29 (13)</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>147 (67)</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>66</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MD, PhD</td>
<td>31 (14)</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Otherd</td>
<td>12 (5)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of research</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basice</td>
<td>170 (78)</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinicalf</td>
<td>49 (22)</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>30</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIH funding to institution by quartileg</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1h</td>
<td>109 (50)</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>57 (26)</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>27 (12)</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>26 (12)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutions with &gt;10 applicants</td>
<td>85 (39)</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time since terminal degree, mean (SD), y</td>
<td>7.5 (3.2)</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviation: NIH, National Institutes of Health.

a Data were collected from applications submitted to 2 regional junior investigator programs from 2012-2014.

b Unless otherwise indicated.

c Calculated using the Kruskal-Wallis test.

d Included animal studies as well as those involving cellular and molecular biology.

e Involved human participants or patient-derived data.

f Included the 25% of all 55 institutions with fiscal year 2014 NIH research funding of more than $122 million.

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Table 2. Institutional Start-up Support for Men and Women Applying for Early-Career Awardsa

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NIH funding to institution by quartileb</th>
<th>Start-up Support, Median (IQR), in 1000s of US$</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>P Valueb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>678 (216-1100)</td>
<td>889 (283-1250)</td>
<td>350 (180-775)</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of degree</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MD</td>
<td>528 (150-900)</td>
<td>596 (50-1123)</td>
<td>474 (200-800)</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>717 (240-1100)</td>
<td>936 (475-1250)</td>
<td>348 (180-750)</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MD, PhD</td>
<td>800 (267-1393)</td>
<td>961 (273-1447)</td>
<td>500 (0-850)</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Type of research</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Basicc</td>
<td>811 (350-1200)</td>
<td>980 (504-1290)</td>
<td>585 (225-882)</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clinicald</td>
<td>210 (89-350)</td>
<td>162 (0-435)</td>
<td>213 (101-350)</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutions with &gt;10 applicants</td>
<td>575 (210-1080)</td>
<td>850 (258-1300)</td>
<td>483 (203-750)</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Abbreviations: NIH, National Institutes of Health; IQR, interquartile range.

a Data were collected from applications submitted to 2 regional junior investigator programs from 2012-2014.

b Calculated using the Kruskal-Wallis test.

c Included animal studies as well as those involving cellular and molecular biology.

d Involved human participants or patient-derived data.

Experience (years since receiving terminal degree) did not correlate with start-up package size for men ($r^2 = 0.01; P = .57$), women ($r^2 = 0; P = .60$), or overall ($r^2 = 0; P = .80$).

Discussion | In this preliminary study of early-career grant applicants administered by 1 organization, junior faculty women received significantly less start-up support from their institutions than men. This discrepancy was significant only among basic scientists and was not explained by degree, years of experience, or institutional characteristics.

The limitations include reliance on limited self-reported and administrative data. The representativeness and generalizability of these results to applicants to other foundations or institutions, or to other biomedical investigators, are unknown.

This first look suggests the need for systematic study of sex differences in institutional support and the relationship to career trajectories.

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Corresponding Author: Robert Sege, MD, PhD, Health Resources in Action, 95 Berkeley St, Boston, MA 02116 (rsege@hria.org).

Author Contributions: Dr Sege had full access to all of the data in the study and takes responsibility for the integrity of the data and the accuracy of the data analysis.

Study concept and design: Sege.

Acquisition, analysis, or interpretation of data: All authors.

Drafting of the manuscript: Sege, Selk.

Critical revision of the manuscript for important intellectual content: All authors.

Statistical analysis: All authors.

Obtained funding: Sege.

Administrative, technical, or material support: Sege, Nykiel-Bub.

The study used coded administrative data and was therefore exempt from human studies review.

Results | The characteristics of the 219 applicants (127 men and 92 women) with complete data are reported in Table 1. An additional 8 men (6%) and 5 women (5%, $P > .99$) had incomplete data and were excluded.

Most applicants (67%) held PhD degrees. Women were in clinical research more frequently than men. There were no differences between men and women in terminal degree or years since receiving terminal degree.

Data on institutional start-up support are reported in Table 2. Overall, men reported significantly higher start-up support (median, $889 000$ [interquartile range, $283 000-1 250 000$]) than women (median, $350 000$ [interquartile range, $180 000-775 000$]; $P < .001$); 51 men (40%) and 11 women (10%) reported more start-up support than women. Start-up support for clinical scientists was not significantly different for men and women.

Administrative, technical, or material support: Sege.
Amyloid Pathology, Cognitive Impairment, and Alzheimer Disease Risk

To the Editor—In a recent meta-analysis, Ms Jansen and colleagues stated that “the presence of SCI [subjective cognitive impairment] in a memory clinic population might not be associated with an increased risk for AD [Alzheimer disease].” This conclusion cannot be drawn from the cross-sectional design of the included studies. It also contradicts a recent meta-analysis of longitudinal studies, which identified an increased dementia risk among patients with SCI. The authors said that they did not find an increased frequency of amyloid positivity in SCI. However, this conclusion appears doubtful for a number of reasons.

First, the main analyses included diagnostic group, age, sex, education, and APOE-ε4 genotype as independent variables. The authors did not consider the increase in APOE-ε4 prevalence among patients with SCI (39.6% vs 29.5% in cognitively normal, \( P < .001 \)). Because APOE-ε4 is strongly associated with amyloid positivity, modeling APOE genotype as an independent variable may mask an increased prevalence of amyloid positivity in the SCI group.

Second, the prevalence estimates in Figure 2 in the article were derived from another model, which included neither APOE genotype nor education. However, comparing highly educated volunteer controls (64.3% with high education) with less well-educated patients with SCI (39.6% with high education, \( P < .001 \)) requires an adjustment for education because higher education (possibly by conferring cognitive reserve) is associated with higher prevalence of amyloid positivity (as depicted in the Supplement for the article).

Third, little information was provided on the differentiation of patients with SCI and controls within the contributing samples with the exception that patients with SCI consulted a memory service. Because the clinical definition of SCI in this meta-analysis was limited, the composition of the SCI and control groups may have varied between the contributing samples, and some control groups may have included patients with SCI (who had not attended a memory service).

There are strong international efforts to identify the earliest signs of AD for future dementia prevention. In this regard, SCI is a clinical condition of great interest and potential. Research on the association of SCI with AD biomarkers is just beginning and requires in-depth analysis of existing data and new studies that focus on SCI.

The conclusion of Jansen et al on the lack of an association of SCI with amyloid positivity is premature because it was based on a crude look at heterogeneous data and did not consider the refined clinical differentiation of SCI, which is required to use it as the first clinical marker of AD.

Michael Wagner, PhD
Frank Jessen, MD

Conflict of Interest Disclosures: The authors have completed and submitted the ICMJE Form for Disclosure of Potential Conflicts of Interest and none were reported.

Funding/Support: The Medical Foundation Division of Health Resources in Action provided access to the administrative data.

Role of the Funder/Sponsor: The Medical Foundation Division of Health Resources in Action had no role in the design and conduct of the study; collection, management, analysis, and interpretation of the data; preparation, review, or approval of the manuscript; and decision to submit the manuscript for publication.

Correction: This article was corrected on October 1, 2015, to fix 1 error in Table 1 and 1 error in Table 2.


COMMENT & RESPONSE

In Reply—Drs Wagner and Jessen disagree with our conclusion that participants with SCI do not have an increased risk for AD compared with cognitively normal participants. We think that this conclusion is justified because participants with SCI had a similar prevalence of amyloid positivity, the pathological hallmark of AD, as cognitively normal participants.

Wagner and Jessen argue that a meta-analysis found that SCI was associated with an increased risk for dementia. However, the outcome measure used in that study was any type of dementia, and therefore it is unclear whether this finding also applies to AD-type dementia.

In addition, Wagner and Jessen outline several possible methodological issues that might explain why amyloid positivity in SCI was not increased relative to cognitively normal participants in our study.

First, they suggest that correction for the APOE genotype could have masked an increased prevalence of amyloid positivity in patients with SCI. However, the analysis presented in Figure 2 in the article was performed without correction for APOE-ε4 carrier status and showed no difference in amyloid