

COLUMN

The question I hate the most

Eleftherios P. Diamandis considers when to retire.

About 30 years ago, I emigrated to Canada to pursue my scientific training. For the past 25 years, my laboratory at Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto has sought biomarkers for use in the early detection of cancer. I love my job as both clinician and scientist. I am now 63 and people throw all kinds of questions at me owing to my diverse experience — and my white hair. But the one I hate the most is: “When are you going to retire?” I hate it because it reminds me that I am in transition. The first time I was asked it, I was 58. The question was unexpected yet it stirred something in my head. And so, I resolved to record whenever people asked me it. At the age of 59, I was asked twice; at 60, four times; at 61, eight times; at 62, sixteen times; and at 63, thirty-two times. By extrapolation, I expect that next year the question will pop up 64 times and by 67, I will be facing it twice a day.

When asked, I pretend not to hear or I whisper something such as “I have no plans to retire” or “I’m still very young”. But when I am alone in my office, the question percolates in my mind. I examine my face in the mirror for fresh wrinkles and ask myself: “Do I really look that old?” The thought that I might be in decline often prompts me to analyse my annual research output for downward trends — papers published, citations received, grants awarded and so on. My favourite statistic is the *h*-index, a measure of both productivity and quality. I love this indicator because it can only rise with age.

Although my lab is still producing good science, I now delegate more tasks, such as grant and manuscript writing, to younger colleagues. And to prepare for my transition into retirement, I have shaped my future plans around my existing passions.

Cyprus, my homeland, is visited by millions of tourists every year. So I thought that I might build a rock ‘n’ roll hall of fame on some land I own there. I could induct

my musical heroes — the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, AC/DC — and play their music while collecting entry fees. I might even make enough money to pay the bills. But because this would mean being so far from my grandchildren, I have shelved the idea, for now.

Another plan I made was to host a radio programme in Toronto. I could get paid to play and discuss my favourite music. In fact, a local station did once offer me a daily one-hour show. But my wife intervened by pointing out how such a regular commitment would interfere with our plans for travel and could only lead to stress.

I also considered becoming a full-time grandpa to two girls under the age of five, but when my grandchildren stay with me for just a weekend, I am left completely exhausted. Regular child-care duties are not an optimal occupation for an ageing academic.

So what might be the optimal choice? Staying in the lab. Throughout my career, I was blessed to forge relationships with diagnostic companies and to obtain patents for some of my lab’s discoveries. Because research grants are becoming more difficult to obtain, I created an account that accumulates the resulting royalties and commercial donations. The fund should be large enough to support a couple of graduate students or postdocs, as well as my research manager, for up to ten years without further funding. This represents about 10% of my current lab staff, which I could handle easily as a mentor and adviser. I would be free to pop into my office at any time, to read *Nature* and *Science*, and to write manuscripts or articles like this. I could visit my grandchildren and then return them to their parents.

Nowadays, I consider retirement to be a continuous process that occurs in small increments, over a long period. This slow transition is allowing me to answer my most hated question, as follows: I am retiring at the pace of one minute per day. ■

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TRADE TALK
Neuro connector

Dorothy Jones-Davis is a scientific project manager at the Foundation for the National Institutes of Health in Bethesda, Maryland, where she helps companies, non-profit organizations and other institutions to collaborate on projects to understand Alzheimer’s disease.

DOROTHY JONES-DAVIS

Why did you decide to leave academia?

After completing my PhD, I moved on to a postdoc and was considering faculty positions because that’s what I was surrounded with. What changed my path was that most of the work I found myself doing was considered to be service work — teaching, mentoring, school governance.

Why does service work interest you?

I seek to connect. I worked to increase diversity in science by exposing kids to science who had not experienced it firsthand. While at the University of California, San Francisco, I sat on high-level committees concerned with diversity in academia, child care and the on-campus culture. I was then awarded a policy fellowship with the aim of broadening participation in engineering. I discovered that I loved influencing the direction of science as well as making connections between folks who should meet. My current job merges those interests.

How did you prepare for your role?

I did my research before coming to the interview. I had noticed that the foundation lacked programmes in autism or epilepsy, so I pitched ideas to address this, such as bringing together companies that were investing in those fields. My interviewers recognized that I understood what the foundation did. Now I manage a partnership between 31 external organizations for a neuroscience-imaging initiative.

What advice do you have for job seekers?

There is no cookie-cutter way to achieve your career dreams. In the end, it’s your road and your willingness to do new things. Everyone is searching for the perfect position, but the honest truth is that you make the position wonderful for you too. ■

INTERVIEW BY MONYA BAKER

This interview has been edited for length and clarity. See go.nature.com/axdrci for more.