

Physician-scientist and the COVID-19 dilemma

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While an excellent and also optimistic review of how the challenges of being a physician-scientist can be offset to some degree by a well-organized, well-trained and committed administrative assistant this article does not address an important reality—the funding and maintenance of such an individual. The COVID-19 pandemic is resulting huge shortfalls in patient volumes and hence major financial challenges in medical centers. Therefore, cutbacks and reductions in staff support for such an administrative support infrastructure for researchers could well be on the short list for cutbacks.

An important need here is more enlightened chairs of departments and research associate deans who can prioritize for these administrative assistants and ‘cheerlead’ for sustaining them even including the option of ‘sharing’ arrangement if needed as a ‘back up’ plan. Otherwise, what it really means to be physician-scientist wearing at least 5 hats is more nighttime and weekend hours. Clinical responsibilities, which is my case as a gastroenterologist, include endoscopic and motility procedures as well as inpatient and outpatient consults, cannot be rescheduled and the expectations of patients and their families have to be met. The fact of life is that in order to be a successful physician-scientist you definitely have to be prepared to commit more than the average faculty member regarding total work hours. This can be rationalized by knowledge that the benefits of discovery and advancing

knowledge all reflect on better patient care and the satisfaction of fulfilling your career goals on many levels. Visible benefits continue to evolve over time for an academic faculty member who pursues the physician-scientist track, specifically career rewards accruing from mentoring, collaborating and providing leadership. However the ‘quality of life’ and particularly family life are compromised by these ambitions. Therefore, Dr Villemain’s article¹ suggesting that universities need creative and committed chairs and leaders, is very timely and relevant to sustain a work-life balance for the physician-scientist, hopefully reducing these excessive night and weekend commitments. However, this challenge will not be resolved by an MBA title after your name. The solutions need to be devised by physician leaders with clinical and investigative roots who can advocate for and promote the financial support and infrastructure needed to sustain and nurture our physician-scientists.

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- 1 Shah S, Villemain OL. Saving the endangered physician-scientists: reintroducing them to an environment of administrative support. *J Investig Med* 2020;**68**:1206–7.