

Women Career Development Awardees: Applying for Funding is a Leading Factor in Receiving Independent Research Support

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In the article, "Sex Differences in Attainment of Independent Funding by Career Development Awardees," Jagsi and colleagues found a sex disparity in the achievement of NIH R01 awards by prior career development (K) awardees, and raised concerns about the progression of women in research careers (1). Several of their conclusions deserve additional scrutiny and discussion.

Most importantly, as the authors acknowledged, they did not have information about application rates. NIH analyses indicate that the rates at which K awardees subsequently apply for research grants are higher for men than for women. Among K08 recipients from 1995 to 1998, for example, 74% of men and 67% of women applied for an R01 award within 10 years ($P=0.0147$). Those disparities also were evident in the broader category of research project grants, where 80% of male and 74% of female K08 recipients applied within 10 years ($P=0.0291$). However, when women K awardees apply for subsequent research grants, NIH data show that they are equally or more successful than their male peers who hold the same types of degrees (e.g., comparing male and female MDs). Additionally, in the total pool of applicants for Type 1 R01s, success rates for men and women are equivalent (2). Combined, these data suggest sex disparities in the receipt of NIH awards are more attributable to differences in application rates than differences in success.

Furthermore, we know that it often takes several years for individuals to completely transition to research independence after receiving a K award. Over the long history of the K08 award, 55% of awardees who receive a subsequent R01 award do so within 5 years; the percentage rises to 76% for 8 years and to 83% for 10 years. As a result, the analyses in "Sex Differences" (which, in some cases, were limited to five years of follow up) likely excluded many K awardees who will later receive an R01 award. NIH data, however, do support Jagsi's finding that women progress from K to research awards somewhat more slowly than men, at least in the beginning of their careers. To help women - and men - who need more time to transition to research independence, NIH recently introduced new policies to allow career development awardees to pursue their projects part-time and new investigators to request an extension to their status as early stage investigators if they have had a lapse in research due to family or other responsibilities (3, 4). We expect these policies to foster continued participation in research by a broad population of investigators.

Finally, Jagsi and colleagues concluded that K awards are smaller for women than for men by comparing average total costs for all K awards. Because the entire pool of K awards includes mentored awards to junior investigators, individual awards to mid-career

and senior investigators, and institutional awards to established investigators, true similarities - or differences - in direct costs between men's and women's awards were likely obscured. Furthermore, because individual K awards largely consist of salary support, any observed differences could be due to differences in institutional salary structure. NIH continues to study these and other issues related to women in research, and urges others to do the same (5, 6).

The authors realize that the transition to research independence will continue to be shaped by personal circumstances for both women and men. We hope that concerns about sex-related differences in NIH funding are allayed and that all potential investigators will be encouraged to apply for NIH research support.

References

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Conflict of Interest:

None declared

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