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Commentary

Being an early career public health professional during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Although early-career researchers (ECRs) represent the foundation of public health infrastructure and are playing a major role in COVID-19 response, existing pandemic pressures are squeezing ECRs out of public health and academic research.¹⁻²

At writing, we as postdoctoral fellows, like many people in our field, had to respond to working from home, some with children at home. We saw the boundary between work and personal time blur and disappear, and at times, pondered whether we want to continue in this field.

This experience is not unique to ECRs, but we want to acknowledge that postdoctoral fellows are in a precarious position. Hiring freezes and diversion of funds meant that job openings were limited or eliminated last year. There have been no systematic mechanisms to extend postdoctoral appointments, akin to faculty tenure-clock extensions or funded/unfunded extensions for PhD students. Many principal investigators have done their best to support graduate students and postdocs during this time.³ There were NIH policies to pay researchers even when they could not physically be at work and university policies for COVID-19 childcare leave. Still, postdoctoral fellows have no job security and those who will be on the market this year face a more crowded candidate pool carried forward from last year.

People forced to leave public health now are the ones who cannot afford to stay longer.⁴ These people are already historically underrepresented in academia (i.e., first-generation college students, people of colour, and women.⁵ They are exactly the people we need to be leaders during the next pandemic for a comprehensive and equitable approach to saving lives. We need universities and non-academic employers to take this into account. For example, university administrators: What opportunities and university support structures exist to extend postdoc appointments? How are these policies communicated to ECRs? Hiring committees and grant reviewers: How are you evaluating ECR candidates with a past-year publication gap or limited publication history? They may be highly qualified, but childcare responsibilities, lost gains in mental health wellness, struggles with networking with overextended mentors, and other factors cannot be documented in a CV.

It is critical that this investment be made today, otherwise the future pipeline of researchers will run dry. Most of the achievements of the past year were possible because of the investment that had been made in yesteryears in people. If this investment is not continued, the future response to an inevitable pandemic would be lacking.

Authors' contribution

AAM wrote the initial draft of the manuscript. All authors contributed to revision, editing and finalization of this manuscript. All authors have approved the final version of the manuscript.

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Declaration of interests

All authors declare no conflict of interest.

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