

Gradline aims to inform and entertain members in the early stages of their career in microbiology. If you have any news or stories, or would like to see any topics featured, contact **Jane Westwell** (e.j.westwell@sgm.ac.uk)

All in a day's work

Are you coming to the end of your degree and thinking about your next steps? Have you considered registering with a recruitment agency but were unsure whether it would be a good move? Gradline Editor, **Jane Westwell**, contacted a couple of the major UK recruitment agencies to get a picture of the range of job opportunities for microbiologists.

SRG and Lab Support UK are two well-known agencies that specialize in supplying contract staff to industry and also find permanent staff (usually in senior roles) for employers. Both agencies recruit microbiologists. Over the last 4 years, SRG has placed 235 microbiologists in 115 companies across the UK. In 2004, Lab Support found work for more than 50 microbiologists. Employers tend to be from the pharmaceutical, food and biotechnology sectors, including contract research and water testing organizations. Most biotechnology companies are SMEs (small to medium sized enterprises) although a few spin-outs also recruit through agencies. Despite the relatively high number of microbiologists that are recruited, it is fair to say that there are fewer opportunities for PhDs than for graduate scientists. Those that do exist are predominantly in the pharmaceutical sector.

Opportunities are mainly temporary, but permanent recruiting is on the increase. Also, 30–40 % of temporary posts convert to permanent positions. Whilst working on contract, scientists are employees of the agency and are

entitled to the usual employment benefits.

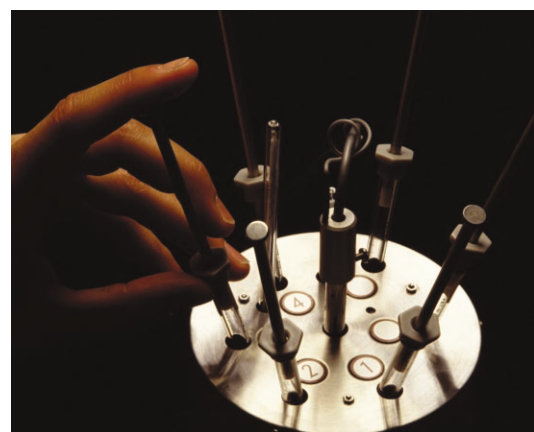
It is rare to place a newly qualified PhD in industry unless they have the specific skills in microbiology or molecular biology that are used in this sector. Possession of 'rare' skills can be an advantage (agencies may list these). Apart from the obvious technical abilities, recruitment agencies are also looking for flexibility, adaptability, and good communication and team working skills. Rather helpfully, all agency websites include a few pages on CV writing and interviews to help potential candidates.

If you are thinking about a career in industry, working through an agency can be good way to gain experience and 'try out' different employers.

Further information

Most recruitment agencies have good websites and it is usually possible to register on-line.

Jobs in Science www.scitemps.co.uk
 Lab Support UK www.labsupport.co.uk
 SCI www.sci-search.com
 SRG www.srg.co.uk
 Yoh Scientific www.yohscientific.co.uk



The 'write' stuff

In December 2004, 18 postgraduate students from Irish institutions took part in a course in scientific writing organized by **Catherine O'Reilly**, Convener of the SGM Irish group. The course comprised two half-day sessions and was run by journalist and ex-geneticist **Mary Mulvihill**. I attended as Convener of the Education & Training Group.

The first session began with a reminder of basic principles of grammar: language and punctuation. Mary provided examples of problems arising due to incorrect grammar (such as the importance of the hyphen in the meaning of 'extra marital sex' as opposed to extra-marital sex!). We then wrote an appropriate sentence or phrase for each item. Following this, we tackled the wordiness common to scientific writing by editing out extraneous phrases (e.g. 'was seen to', 'it would appear that') and repetitions (e.g. 'separate entities', 'new beginnings'). We rearranged massive strings of nouns ('blue absorbing

Postgraduate skills workshop

Surviving your PhD

1800–2000, 6 April 2005, Heriot-Watt University

The workshop will consider three key issues that face PhD students at different stages of their training: handling the supervisor/student relationship, effective writing and defending research in the viva. We have brought together three supervisors to share their experience gleaned from guiding many postgrads to PhD success. The workshop will be chaired by SGM Council member **Dr Pauline Handley** from the University of Manchester.

Dr Liz Sockett, University of Nottingham, will start the session with a talk on *Managing your supervisor*. Liz will draw on her years of experience as student, post-doc and then supervisor to take a look at the student/supervisor

relationship. She will shed light on that sometimes inexplicable supervisor behaviour and will provide some hints to get over the sticky moments that many research students experience.

Professor Ian Poxton, University of Edinburgh, will follow with a talk on *Writing skills*. Ian has successfully supervised more than 35 students through the thesis-writing process and read many more theses in his capacity as PhD examiner. He will share his knowledge and experience to help those of you tackling transfer reports and theses. Ian is also Editor-in-Chief of *JMM* and will have some words of advice for first time authors of research papers.

Dr Bob Rastall, University of Reading, will end the evening with a presentation on *Strategies for a successful viva*. Bob has more than a decade's experience of helping his own research students successfully prepare for the viva and acts as external examiner to a number of universities. Bob will identify potential viva pitfalls and round up with some sound advice to help you on the way to a positive viva experience.

After a question and answer session chaired by Pauline, we hope you will join us for a glass of wine or two and a bite to eat. Tickets for the buffet and reception will be available at the end of the workshop.

Please note. Wednesday night accommodation will be covered by PG Student Conference Grants for those who wish to attend this session (www.sgm.ac.uk/grants).

pigment spectral curve', 'the negative penicillin skin test result group') and eliminated 'hedging' – excessive use of over-cautious conditional words.

Having tackled the dry and dusty, Mary tried to persuade us to bring some life to our scientific writing but encountered some initial problems. We were all dutiful, passive and unemotional scientific writers who showed great resistance to the use of 'we' and huge reluctance to start sentences with 'and'. However, a bit of expressive/creative writing unleashed a flow of emotions and active writing. We gave our pet micro-organisms a character (precocious, fussy, smelly, tough and resistant, slimy and bitchy) then began writing in a particular genre, such as horror, love, detective story, or diary.

'The smooth, silky colonies glistened from the crimson plate they lay scattered upon. One look at them and I knew I was lost in their magnificence. I set about counting them. Their bodies lay crushed against one another; it was difficult to see where one settlement started and another ended. Where once the undisturbed plate lay naked, exposed to the world, now stood thousands of multiplying factories, expanding before my eyes.' (Matthew Lambert, Trinity College Dublin)

'Once upon a time, there lived 13 little Pseudomonas aeruginosas. They loved to hang out in the lungs of cystic fibrosis patients. They were all anti-drug activists, and refused to allow any drugs into their neighbourhood. One, PA13, was the leader of the group. He had absolutely no time for drugs, especially gentamycin.' (Anon)

Nerves now lost, we were given 25 minutes to write a *New Scientist* style article based on some facts provided by Mary. We then compared our efforts and the actual article – a useful exercise in the use of concise, precise but accessible English.

The second day felt more like a 'typical' scientific writing session. Mary and a young lecturer from Waterford Institute of Technology shared tips and experiences of writing for journals. As a final exercise, participants were asked to write an abstract for a paper recently submitted by Catherine (provided prior to the workshop) in only 40 minutes. The abstracts were judged and a prize awarded to the winner. The session ended with some useful discussion on my own and Catherine's experiences as writers and reviewers.

This intensive course was very useful and productive. Mary was careful to involve everyone in all activities. Catherine arranged a popular evening social event for anyone who wished to attend and the group had certainly bonded by the end of the two sessions.

Oral, visual and written communication skills are essential to all postgraduates and are usually addressed via university-organized events. This course covered issues of scientific written communication in an active and interesting manner – and I doubt if I can ever look at colonies on blood agar in the same way again!

Professor Joanna Verran (e.j.verran@mmu.ac.uk)