



SOS PAGE

**SHORT DISCUSSIONS
FOR STUDENTS PAGE**

ACROSS THE DITCH: MY JOURNEY FROM PHD TO POSTDOC

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I once heard the word 'zeteophobia', a term coined by the psychologist and Stanford University professor John Krumboltz. Zeteophobia is defined as 'a fear of career planning'. I guess I can be somewhat zeteophobic, though I hope that I will land on my feet despite this!

It has now been a few years since I finished my PhD in structural immunology at Monash University. While I was in that tumultuous period of writing my thesis, I also embarked on my next mission: to find a suitable postdoc position. Many of you will soon be making this transition yourselves, so I thought I'd share with you my own journey from my PhD lab with Professor Jamie Rossjohn to where I am now at the Institute for Molecular Bioscience at the University of Queensland. These are not easy decisions, and I will be quite honest about the thoughts and emotions I felt during this transition. I hope you find it useful and I wish you all the best as you tread your own career paths.

I guess I should begin by telling you a little about my background. Before starting my PhD in 2005, I had worked for three years at AstraZeneca-Griffith University in Brisbane. I loved the Big Pharma environment and always thought that I would return to industry eventually. However, when I came to finishing my PhD, I was well aware that industry jobs in Australia were limited. I also felt a big push from mentors and colleagues to go overseas. In terms of fellowship and grant applications, it is still highly regarded if you have done an overseas postdoc. And so I began scouring websites and mailing lists for potential jobs and fellowship schemes.

I spotted a couple of jobs that interested me and I had found a meeting on drug design in Sicily. I decided I'd kill two birds with one stone and find some interviews in UK/Europe after I attended the conference. I interviewed at the Structural Genomics Consortium in Oxford and the Beatson Cancer Institute in Glasgow. I was travelling alone on this trip, and on the long flight back to Australia, I realised I was very reluctant to move so far away from Australia for my career. My family and friends are the most important things to me; my work is a close second. I recognise that not everyone has these same priorities, but I was certain that moving to the other side of the world for a long time and missing out on what was happening in my friends' and family's lives would not make me happy.

So with a clearer head, and knowing I didn't want to move far from Australia, I followed the advice of several postdocs in my PhD lab who recommended contacting Professor Ted Baker at the University of Auckland. Ted's work/life balance fitted well with my ideals, his focus on family struck a chord with me, it was only a three-hour flight home, the science was at the forefront, and Ted is highly regarded within my field. I was successful in obtaining an NHMRC Fellowship to travel to Auckland, with the plan to return to Australia after two years.

Whilst in Ted's lab, I was assigned to work on a drug design project in collaboration with a pharmacologist, Dr Debbie Hay. She is studying novel targets for the development of therapeutics to treat cardiovascular disease and cancer. The people in the lab were fantastic and welcoming, and I had a great project. Yet, in spite of this, I found myself quite unsettled and unhappy. I was about to turn 30 and I was single. I had no savings or assets after being a student for so long, and the cost of moving countries was a significant financial setback. Most of my friends back home were now

well into their careers and earning a decent wage. They had bought houses, were married, and had children on the way. This led me to question what I had missed out on by choosing a research career. I also knew that my time in NZ was of fixed length. For me, I felt torn, trying to build relationships and feel 'at home' in NZ, while also knowing I was going to have to pack up and travel back across the 'ditch' to Oz.

Being in limbo made things very difficult. When my experiments weren't working, I took this personally, and I convinced myself I was not cut out to be a scientist. I decided I wanted out – perhaps a less stressful job would suit me? One with a more clear-cut career path? One with a bigger paycheck? One where there were more tangible goals and outcomes? I had long discussions with friends and colleagues, and they wisely advised me to put my fellowship on hold to take some time to think about things. Looking back, they were absolutely right; I was not in the best frame of mind to be making big career decisions.

And so I moved back to Australia, a year earlier than I had originally intended. It had been over six years since I'd been living in my hometown of Brisbane. After some deep soul searching and with the support of my family, I decided to return to research. There are many things that I love about research. I like the fact that what I do for a living may end up positively impacting people's lives in some way. Medical research can be extremely rewarding when you see your work being published, used in the clinic or being described in the media. I like the independence that science offers as a career, the opportunity to problem solve, the chance to learn new things every day, the travel opportunities, and the freedom of the working hours.

My discussions with many scientists during this time led me to realise that I was not alone when having these doubts and frustrations. In fact, from what I have observed, after a few years of 'postdocing', around half of all researchers have seriously considered leaving science. Furthermore, around a quarter of them do end up changing careers. Many esteemed group leaders had also questioned whether science was 'worth it' both financially and emotionally. Somehow, it was a comfort to know that others had been through a similar thought process, but in the end had decided that despite being tough, this is what they wanted to do with their lives.

For me, in order to build my confidence as a researcher,

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I felt I needed a strong female mentor who was sensitive and recognised that women could play the game a little differently from men and still sustain an academic research career. It was around this time that I had some encouraging conversations with my now supervisor, Professor Jenny Martin. She has been an excellent role model and given me a great deal of advice and support whilst returning to research.

So I guess I'd now like to give some advice to others looking for a postdoc position. I think it is very important to gain experience in a new laboratory outside the comfort of your PhD lab. This change gives you the chance to learn new techniques and start to develop your own research niche. Keep in mind that at this point of your career you are still being 'trained'. You might have the lab skills but you still need to learn how to teach, manage teams, and write grants. I think it's best to choose a lab and mentor that are successful (i.e. track record and grants) and that also fit well with your ideals, both scientifically and in terms of work/life balance.

I disagree that it is necessary to go overseas to do this. Some people thrive in an overseas environment, but not everyone needs to do this in order to be a 'successful scientist'. There are great opportunities right here within Australia, so why push our most talented scientists to leave the country? Do we really believe that the 'best' research is done offshore? Many Australian group leaders were trained overseas, so they can provide insight into how research is conducted internationally and a doorway to collaborations. Australian laboratories are now highly multicultural, providing rich diversity in terms of research ideas. In some respects, it may actually help to stay in Australia to get your foot in the door with the ARC and NHMRC funding schemes. Learning how to write successful grants for Australia in terms of government research priorities is an important skill to learn if you wish to establish a research career here in the long term.

Finally, my most important piece of advice is to get as much information as possible before making a decision. Talk to your PhD supervisor about who they would recommend. Talk to postdocs in your lab, department and institute. Talk to scientists at conferences. Talk to your partner, family and friends. Do what 'feels' right for you and try not to stress too much about it – if you find something doesn't work out, you can always change your mind. As the famous quote goes, 'I used to be indecisive, but now I'm not so sure'.

