

## The Question I Hate Most

**Word Count: 1,851**

I absolutely love my job as a Clinician/Scientist at the Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine at Mount Sinai Hospital in Toronto. The job pays very well, it is secure and allows me complete freedom. I can adjust my hours of work, select my research areas, travel, interact with a bunch of bright young students and post-doctoral fellows and continuously expand my knowledge by reading scientific literature. What else could I ask for? In the context of the reading to follow, I should mention that I emigrated from Cyprus to Toronto, Canada about 30 years ago, have 2 children who are clinician/scientists themselves, a wife/scientist who is working full-time and 2 wonderful grandchildren, soon going for a third.

If I were to have the option, my current professional status would remain the same in the future, but I also recognize that this is not a realistic expectation. Thirty years ago, a Canadian law stipulated mandatory retirement at age 65; however, this limit has since been removed and you can work as long as you want.

I am 63 now, and people throw all kinds of questions at me. One question that I hate most is “When are you going to retire?” or “Are you retiring soon?” I hate this question because it reminds me that I am likely in transition. I better have plans for the future, or else I may face unpleasant surprises. The first time I was asked this question, I was 58 years old. The question was so unexpected, that it rang a bell in my head. I immediately opened an Excel file in which I started recording how many

people asked me this question in the following years. My log indicates that at age 59, I was asked twice, at 60, four times, at 61, eight times, at 62, sixteen times and 63, thirty-two times. Based on this exponential growth, I can expect that next year this question will pop-up 64 times (more than once a week) and by the age of 67, I will face the question twice daily. This probably means that I will have to address this issue sooner or later.

When asked about my retirement plans, I currently respond by pretending that I didn't hear, or whispering briefly something like "no plans of retiring" or "I'm still very young" and the like. But when I am alone in my office, the question percolates in my mind; I shut my door and I closely examine my face in the mirror, to spot any new wrinkles and ask myself "Do I really look old?". The thought that I may be declining is dreadful and often prompts me to open my Curriculum Vitae and start analyzing my annual output statistics and other parameters such as papers published, citations received, grants awarded, number of people working in the lab, etc and compare it to previous years to detect any clear declining trends. My favourite parameter to examine is the H-index, an indicator of both productivity and quality (See *Nature* 2011;478:419). I love this index because it only goes up with age!

While the lab is still functioning and producing good science, I have to admit that I now rely more on delegating important tasks, including grant and manuscript writing to younger colleagues, instead of handling everything on my own, as I did in previous years. Nonetheless, even though I believe that I am not yet done with science, the

situation has prompted me to start preparing for the transition stage from a full-time academic clinical scientist to a retiree. In preparation for the next chapter of my life, I considered my strengths and options, and came-up with some possible scenarios which I would like to share with you.

I identified 3 areas of strength that may become my golden parachute when I enter retirement in a few years, which include: my family, my love for sports, especially tennis and golf, and my absolute fascination with music, especially rock-n-roll music (eg: see ASBMB Today 2015;14:50). Here are some of my thoughts and plans, in no particular order:

1) Rock-n-Roll Hall of Fame:

I have some property in my homeland, Cyprus, an island that receives millions of tourists every year. My plan is to build a theater on one of my properties, which will become the International Hall of Fame for Rock-n-Roll. My heroes, such as The Beatles, Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, ACDC and the like, will be inducted (by me!). I would create a show around their music, which, I thought, would be highly attractive to the tourist population. I would throw a party every evening, play Rock-n-Roll music to these audiences and cash in on their entry fees. Do I have a good business case? Maybe. But when my children grew-up and my grandchildren were born, I realized that this was not the best of my ideas since it will necessitate me being away from my beloved grandchildren for far too long. I was also worried that the repetitive

nature of the show will probably bore me in the long run. I thus shelved this idea for the time being.

2) Radio Host:

My love for music prompted me to think that one of the greatest jobs I could do, while having lots of fun, is to become a radio host. I would have my own program, play the music I like and add my personal comments and stories behind the hits. I figured that if the program were entertaining, it would likely have many followers (and financial success), while at the same time I would enjoy doing it for my own pleasure. However, this plan for a radio station in the island of Cyprus was abandoned due to the aforementioned reason. But I did contact a local Greek radio station in Toronto and made inquiries. In fact, I made progress in securing a one-hour daily radio show and was ready to sign. My wife then intervened and indicated that this kind of commitment will likely become a burden in the long run, since I will not be able to enjoy travelling and will have a lot of stress in preparing these programs daily. And so, for those reasons, there goes my radio host aspirations.

3) Sports:

As a sports fanatic, and especially a tennis fan, I have written about tennis in the past (Clin Chem 2009;55:1253-4). I often attend tennis tournaments and have enjoyed taking pictures with tennis superstars, like the one included with this article (see picture). One of my plans for retirement would be to travel to

international tournaments, especially the Grand Slams, and watch my favourite sports in various countries. This aspiration came to an end, when I attended the latest US Open Tennis Tournament in Flushing Meadows, New York. There, I had to sit in the scorching sun for hours and hours, only to realize that at the end of the day, I was totally exhausted and did not even have the energy to return back to my hotel. For some of these matches, I sought shaded areas in which I took long naps. I now realize that no matter how much I love the sport, spending my retirement attending these tournaments would be totally unrealistic. Besides, I much prefer my living room and a large TV screen!

4) Family:

One of the greatest pleasures of my life are my 2 lovely granddaughters (ages 2 and 3) whom I visit regularly and babysit on every possible occasion. I thought that there would be no dull minute, if I become a full-time grandpa and took care of my granddaughters (driving them to school and to lessons for dancing, singing, music, tennis, etc.). Despite my absolute fascination with the girls, and the great time I spend with them, I am slowly starting to realize that a full-time grandpa job is just about one of the most difficult jobs one could do! The amount energy required to run after them all the time, carry them when they do not want to walk, and feed and bathe them on a daily basis is quite overwhelming. On some occasions, when the children were given to us for weekends, I noticed that I have been totally exhausted, with exaggerated back and muscle pain. Now, I am almost certain that being a grandpa is great, but

being a full-time grandpa is a very difficult job that is not well-suited for an aging Professor.

#### Epilogue:

While my plans for retirement are still under construction, my current working plan is as follows: First, I will make sure (I am working on this) that by the time I retire, I have an unrestricted fund of approx. \$500 - \$1million, available for my future research. This is feasible through funds received from commercial collaborators. I will build a portfolio that will be enough to support a couple of graduate students and my trusted long-time research manager for about 5-10 years, even without any new funding. I believe that this fund will allow me to negotiate an arrangement with my Research Institute, to maintain my office and a small research laboratory, along with an administrative assistant. Although I realize that our current output indicators could not be maintained, some high quality work could come out of this small operation. I would have no pressure to publish or receive new grants and I will be free to pop-up in my office at any time, take care of my emails, read *Nature* and *Science*, write some manuscripts or other stories (like this one), while being flexible to leave at any time. I will keep my one-hour of exercise every morning, while listening to my favourite music, and have the freedom to travel and attend conferences. I could take additional time off if I wanted, and go to select tennis and golf tournaments at my will. I will pay visits to my grandchildren, play and entertain them, and then leave them with their parents. I will return home for some good rest, watch a movie or the daily news. The planning continues!

What would be my response to those who will be asking me “When am I going to retire?”. As I eluded from the above, I consider retirement not as an abrupt change from one day to another, but rather, as a continuous process in which adaptation happens in small increments, over a long period of time. This slow transition will allow me to answer this annoying question as follows: I am retiring at the pace of one min per day.

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