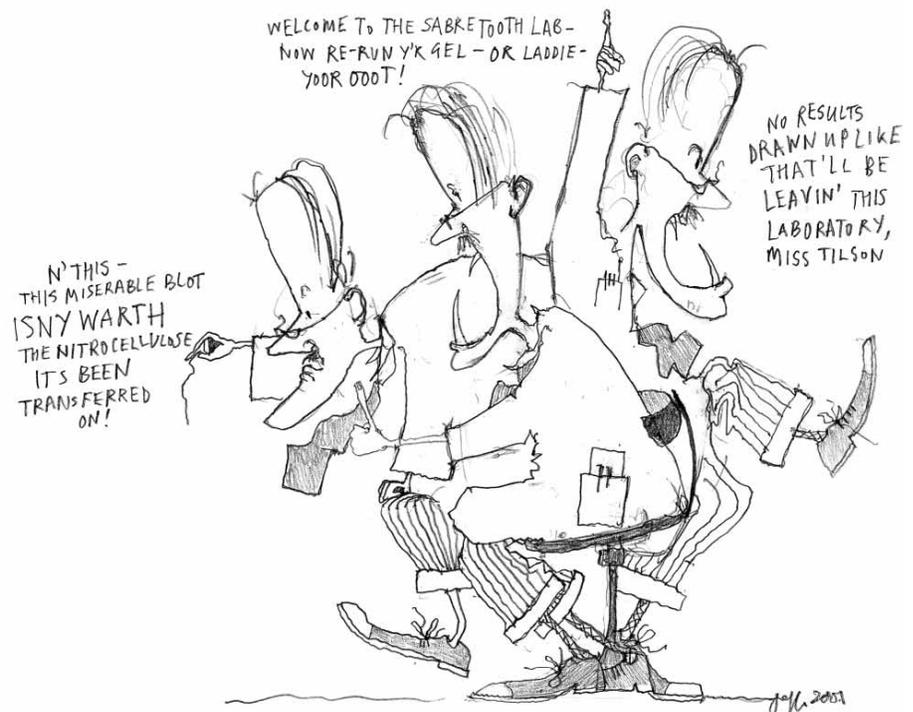


An occasional column, in which Caveman and other troglodytes involved in cell science emerge to share their views on various aspects of life-science research. Messages for Caveman and other contributors can be left at caveman@biologists.com. Any correspondence may be published in forthcoming issues.

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A memo to graduate students and postdocs

Dear students, employees and co-workers,

I'm sorry to be unhelpful, but I am **not** your mother! If your experiments aren't working, try and find out why before coming and asking me to think it through for you. If an essential piece of equipment is broken and you need it for your work, try fixing it. Failing that, you could even have a look through the instruction manual and see what needs doing. And if (God forbid) you can't think of the next experiment you ought to be doing, go away, read a few papers, discuss it with another graduate student or postdoc, and try and think your own way through it. Your mother's job was to wipe up the food you spilled and clean up your grazes when you fell over. Mine is to help you become a scientist, and to make sure you have enough money to buy those enzymes you seem to drink by the gallon (according to the last budget report). If you're really stuck, I'm here to help, but that doesn't mean I should interpret every little piece of data and plan out every experiment. Even your mother can't help with that. That's your job.

I shouldn't really have to say this, but by Crikey I do. The trouble is that people's idea of what constitutes an education has changed, and science (like much of the rest of society) never caught up. The concept that graduate students are adults, capable of ploughing their own furrows and making their own mistakes, has gone the way of the dodo. Nowadays we fill out forms to show how well our students are mentored and count the talks that people attend. Before anyone will give us a position for a new student, we have to prove that all previous victims have been well looked after, changed their underclothes and taken plenty of exercise. Nobody, however, checks whether the newly fledged PhDs from our labs are scientists or automata; so there can seem to be no future in encouraging anyone to think. The prospect of a student failing to get a PhD at the end of their program is too appalling for a university to countenance. The supervisor of a failed student (however dreadful they were) will be lucky to get funding for another; so there's plenty of pressure to make sure people perform, and little encouragement to let people stand on their own feet.

The current science-funding regime

