

# An Early-Career Scientist Ponders an Uncertain Career

**A letter from Kokila Shankar, PhD, a Postdoctoral Researcher at Sanford Burnham Prebys**

Imagine spending years of your life working toward a goal. You've sacrificed time, sleep, hobbies and health in pursuit of this goal. A goal that stands to benefit society on a global scale. Just when you start to think you may have achieved this goal, the ladder you've climbed is being dismantled piece by piece as you're climbing it, and you have no idea when the rung you're standing on will get pulled away...

That's exactly what it feels like being an early-career scientist in the United States right now.

I started graduate school during the first Trump administration, and now I am a second-year postdoc during the second Trump administration. Completing a PhD in that time – a feat that is exhausting and stressful in the best of times – while it felt like the government actively fought against your success was truly a Sisyphean task.

And *I'm tired*. Tired of science constantly being under attack. Tired of stressing about whether or not we'll have funding to do our work. Tired of watching all of my international colleagues worry about whether they're going to get deported. I'm just so tired.

My goal in becoming a scientist has always been to help people. The joy of discovery, the satisfaction of well-crafted experiments, and the impact of our science on society are strong motivators for all of us who work in scientific research. We don't choose this career path for money or fame, but merely to satisfy our inherent desire to make the world a better place. However, this current administration is undermining our efforts, wantonly slashing funding and vilifying words like "vaccines" and "diversity."

I currently serve as a co-chair of the Sanford Burnham Prebys Science Network, the postdoctoral association at the Institute. My goal as a community leader is to uplift my fellow early-career scientists and work with others at the institute to ensure we are all prepared to excel in our careers.

What I love about this institute is that it is small but mighty; despite our size, we are an extraordinary research powerhouse with high-level talent to carry out important work. The scale of support services that we have at Sanford Burnham Prebys per capita vastly outshines our peer institutions, providing infrastructure for constant progress. Importantly, we also have a phenomenally inclusive environment – we celebrate the different backgrounds, cultures, and demographics that make up our institute. These factors strengthen our institutional community, and this deep level of support allows us to make monumental leaps forward in our research.

But that support is now in jeopardy. Trump's nonsensical (and illegal) cuts to research funding threaten the resources we can provide the next generation of scientists and cripple the progress we can make. Federal funding cuts mean institutional budget cuts, which means fewer resources that ensure we continue to do great science. Additionally, the majority of grad students, postdocs, and staff scientists here are on visas. They choose to be thousands of miles away from their homes and loved ones because they recognize the caliber of research in the United States and at Sanford Burnham Prebys. Loss of support means many will have to return home, depriving us of talented and innovative individuals.

All we as early-career scientists and trainees want is to find jobs in science where we can have an impact, whether it be in academia, pharma/biotech or somewhere else. But with grants being slashed, the head of Health and Human Services (Robert F. Kennedy) not understanding how science and health actually work, and the economy in a tailspin, most of us are either stuck not knowing if we can finish up our research or we will be leaving Sanford Burnham Prebys for an inhospitable job market.

All of our years of effort have the potential to be squandered. When you multiply that by all the postdocs and graduate students across the country, it amounts to Trump kneecapping the next generation of scientific leaders in the U.S.

I hope that our country recovers from this, not for my sake as a scientist, but for the millions of people that are now further away from effective cures and treatments for cancer, neurological disease, and more.

I hope that Sanford Burnham Prebys withstands this turmoil so that it can continue to nurture early-career scientists like me who will drive the next decade of biomedical research advancement.

In the meantime, I will continue to help build our community, providing a safe and inclusive space for all grad students, postdocs, and staff scientists to thrive at Sanford Burnham Prebys.

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