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Physician scientists. We need to act now.

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Physician scientists. We need to act now.

Sir,
I wish to comment in a personal capacity on your timely and welcome review of the need for physician scientists[1]. It is understandable that much of the current emphasis relating to our health service is on capacity and patient access, but a health service that does not have research and development as a core component is not one that can claim to be world class. However, there are many pressures on healthcare staff, especially on medical doctors, when carrying out research. Those who would aspire to be physician scientists often have multiple commitments in the areas of clinical service, healthcare education, advocacy and contributions to professional societies, colleges and organisations, as well as research. Furthermore in an era when the majority of medical graduates are female, there are particular challenges related to this such as gender discrimination and a preference for teaching over research[2].
I have previously argued for the unsustainability of the current model for academic medicine in Ireland[3]. If we are to develop and further enhance medical research, we need a new model with agreement and commitment from all those involved, i.e. the Health Service Executive, universities, funding bodies, professional organisations and the public. However, we also need to ensure that sufficient numbers of medical doctors choose a career in academic medicine. This can be facilitated by mentoring, early exposure to medical research, mitigating debt incurred during medical school, and by providing a specific career path for doctors interested in the academic route[4,5].
Given the day-to-day pressure on politicians and healthcare managers to provide a timely and accessible health service, it is unlikely that they are going prioritise the needs of academic medicine or the nurturing of physician scientists. Consequently, it is essential that the profession itself make the case strongly that research in our health service is essential and that furthermore physician scientists can contribute hugely to the quality of healthcare delivery, and with others lead a world class health service into the future.
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