

# science

## Women in science: forced to choose

"When to have kids? It seems like there will never be time. I'm 26 now and have three or four more years to go on my PhD and then maybe a post-doc or two and if I'm lucky enough to actually get a job when I'm done then I'll have to work like crazy for five years to get tenure and wow! I'd like to have a family at the same time without spontaneously combusting. How do you do it?"

A recurring topic of discussion among women graduate students, post-doctoral fellows and professors in science around the world is children: if and when we should try to have them. We trade stories at research meetings, at seminars, and through e-mail. Some argue that waiting until you have tenure is the only safe way. Others advise that graduate school is the best time because you can better manage the time demands involved. Still others decide children and the fight to stay competitive in scientific research are

incompatible. The issues of financial stability, having a supportive partner, discrimination in hiring practices, child care, maternity leave, tenure considerations, and stereotypes, among others, are constantly rehashed.

All such questions as when to have children, or who should be eligible for paid/unpaid parental leave and how long they should have, revolve around the fact that in our capitalist world the ideal employee is one who devotes their life to the job. Employers naturally wish to hire the most productive worker, one who is willing to put in upwards of sixty hours a week while getting paid for forty. If labs manage to hire such people (and they do — there are many people desperate to work under any conditions), these standards of higher productivity must be adopted by more and more labs. Science today is a high-speed race to get to the answers before anyone else: the promotions, the big money, and the Nobel

prizes go to those who publish first. The end result is a squeezing out of people who may be excellent researchers but who simply aren't a speedy return on investment. A finite number of jobs exist in science. There is getting to be very little room for those who wish to do quality work inside work hours but reserve evenings and weekends for other pursuits.

What few of us ever discuss, though (probably because we don't have time!), is the real heart of the problem. Why is raising children a subordinate responsibility that employers will grudgingly permit you to fulfill, a chore to be fitted in around the inviolable, ever-expanding borders of paid work, a job that has to be accomplished at major cost to women in terms of career security? Why do women have to choose be-

tween contributing to the future in the form of scientific research or in the form of children? Why is there no support for a woman who wants — and is amply qualified — to do both in her lifetime?

Should women then even try to be both scientists and mothers? I can't argue with the fact that science is an increasingly fast, competitive sport and that you must have what it takes to do good science in order to survive. However, I'm not sure that being willing to work until the wee hours necessarily means that you have what it takes. The back-breaking part of science is the benchwork, true — but the real advances come from individuals who can synthesize ideas, not DNA or aspirin. The ability to ask the right questions, to choose the best way to discover the

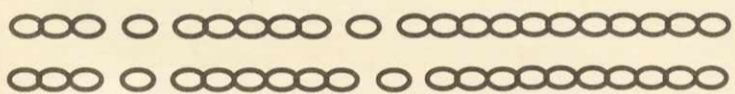
answers, and to understand and integrate the answers that come out of investigations — that is what makes one a good scientist. Statistics released recently indicate that by the fifteenth or twentieth year of their careers, men publish about 60 percent more per year than women, but that despite this difference in the number of papers, there is less than a 5 percent difference in the number of citations of the work of men and women, suggesting that women take more time on each paper, but publish better papers. It is a loss to research that many bright women, whose interest in things outside science may well make them better able to do 'good science', are forced out of the scientific rat race because they do it more slowly.

Gwynedd Morgan

### POINTLESS PONDERABLES

**Answer:**

We certainly hope you didn't resort to trying all the combinations. If so, then take a look at this week's puzzle. The answer is that only two cuts need be made in the chain to do the job. These cuts can also be made in one of two different ways. Below are the two possible cut combinations.



**Question:**

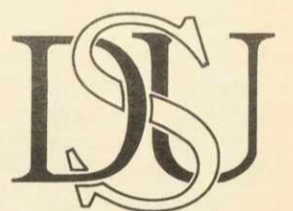
Here is this week's challenger. You and six other students are stranded on a desert island (happens all the time right?). For food you all gather coconuts and throw them in a pile. By the time you finish gathering all these coconuts it's late at night so you all decide to get some rest then divide the coconuts up evenly the next day amongst the seven of you. During the night you become mistrustful of the others on the island and decide to get your share right away. You sneak out to the pile and divide it up evenly into seven piles with one extra coconut. You throw the extra coconut to a passing monkey and stash your pile away. Through the night the other six stranded students do the same thing, they each divide the pile into seven even piles with one extra coconut that they throw away. In the morning there are exactly six coconuts left. How many coconuts did the original pile contain? For you math types, assume you don't know how many coconuts were left in the morning. What's the general solution for how many coconuts could be in the original pile?

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