

## Private Funding for Molecular Evolution

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In this issue of the *Journal of Molecular Evolution*, two papers appear from research efforts that were partially or wholly funded from a private foundation. As funding for research from governmental sources gets increasingly scarce, scientists are turning to alternative sources to keep the lights on in their laboratories. This affects many disciplines of course, but molecular evolutionary studies are especially vulnerable. On the one hand, the pursuit of an understanding of the Earth's evolutionary history is somewhat of a philosophical pursuit, and of course evolutionary thinking per se has had a rocky path to acceptance by the general (read: tax-paying) public. Many in the field can point to many practical applications of advances in evolutionary biology—two obvious examples being an appreciation for the spread of bacterial resistance to antibiotics and an appreciation for the problems faced by overuse of pesticides; however, for the average person on the street, there may be little benefit to paying for knowing what happened millions or billions of years ago. And on the other hand, molecular evolution in particular has a hard time from benefitting from “warm and fuzzy” money, which is to say that organismal evolutionary biologists can at least appeal to a shared sense among most that our plant and animal brethren deserve a helping hand. Molecular evolutionists, tracing the fate of minute nano-scale structures as they change over time, are hard-pressed to drum up governmental support in lean economies.

Fortunately there are encouraging signs that private foundations, and even individual philanthropists, are seeing the enormous value of our field. For many years, the Alfred

P. Sloan Foundation specifically supported molecular evolution and offered valuable funding such as their Young Investigator Awards. While Sloan no longer specifically targets molecular evolutionists, they do still advocate, and support, basic research in other disciplines. Other foundations have filled some of the void left when these Young Investigator Awards were discontinued. The John Templeton Foundation, and more recently, the Simons Foundation have promoted basic evolutionary biology research. And in some sense, the broader and more fundamental the studies, the more eager these organizations seem to be to provide support.

Auspiciously, there are even signs that the general public at a more grass-roots level may be interested in stepping up to help molecular evolution. Crowd funding is an exciting new option for relatively small amounts of funding for any sort of pursuit, and surely young molecular evolutionists could be kick started through such means, although I do not yet know of any specific cases of this. Another wonderful example are the efforts of one Mr. Harry Lonsdale, who personally initiated and funded the “Origins of Life Challenge” that led to the support of the research in this issue of *JME*. These works are those of Ritson & Sutherland and of DeGuzman et al., q.v. The senior author on the first of these, Dr. John Sutherland, was one of the two winners (along with Dr. Matthew Powner) of the Origins of Life Challenge in 2012. There is little doubt that Dr. Sutherland is most appreciative of the support given by Mr. Lonsdale who, for his part, has said, “Over the past five centuries, so many of the mysteries of antiquity have been solved ... but not the origin of life on Earth. The solution to that problem will have a profound impact and far-reaching consequences.” (personal communication). Clearly, this is an enlightened view of our pursuit as human beings, and hopefully it will serve to

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inspire many others to put their money where their minds are.

More information on some of these private funding sources may be found at the following internet sites (as of May 1, 2014):

The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation—<http://www.sloan.org>

The John Templeton Foundation—<http://www.templeton.org>

The Simons Foundation—<http://www.simonsfoundation.org>

The Origins of Life Challenge—<http://www.originlife.org>

**Funding** (Disclaimer: The Origins of Life Challenge has also provided funding for my own research laboratory.)