Dr. Andrechek Goes to Washington

Michigan State University (MSU) Assistant Professor Eran Andrechek, Ph.D., had only been to Washington, D.C., as a tourist, “with the wife and kids.” But last month he found himself in a suit and tie, participating in the Rally for Medical Research and later meeting with staffers representing members of the Michigan congressional delegation on Capitol Hill.

His message, and those of the other 300 or so participants, was simple: boost funding for NIH and keep it steady.

At age 40, he’s just the sort of investigator that the Federation of American Societies for Experimental Biology (FASEB), and others, hope will become more involved in “telling their stories” directly to federal and state lawmakers and other policy makers in Washington and elsewhere.

To make it easier to engage folks like Andrechek, FASEB recently launched a website with advocacy tools and will hold a related webinar later this month. The website also comes on the heels of similar admonitions by speakers at the recent meeting of the Federal Demonstration Partnership (see stories, p. 1).

It didn’t hurt that the current FASEB president is Joseph Haywood, MSU’s assistant vice president for regulatory affairs (and a professor of pharmacology and toxicology). Andrechek, part of the Physiology Department, was also encouraged to make the trip by Walter Esselman, MSU’s associate dean of research, who first approached him about advocacy work in 2013 and again this year.

But it wasn’t as if Andrechek needed a lot of convincing to come to Washington, D.C. He knows how difficult it is to get grants and felt the issue was important enough for him to become personally involved in advocating for increased funding.

It took at least five tries for Andrechek, who studies breast cancer heterogeneity, to win his first NIH grant; he’s now in the third year of the five-year award that he said was supposed to be for $250,000 annually. His lab actually sees less than that, due to subtractions for indirect costs and sequestration, which lowered NIH awards across the board.

His track record is three awards total following 30 submissions over the past several years to government agencies as well as private foundations and others. His experiences have taught him that winning an award entails a fair amount of luck (a particularly interested peer reviewer can make all the difference) along with a good bit of mystery (the same proposal can get rejected by NIH but win foundation awards, and vice versa).

“One of the things we have to be able to do is tell people why the work we do is important,” Andrechek told RRC, as well as describe progress thus far and emphasize that “we need more money.” With success rates for NIH grants at record lows, good scientific projects are going unfunded, Andrechek said.

FASEB officials told him “to make a personal connection, [and] give them [congressional staffers] a story they are going to remember.” He believed his remarks hit home with those he met, although he recognizes it’s a long road from what he did to actual funding measures being passed. “I think we are planting a seed,” Andrechek told RRC.

For his part, Andrechek was eager to get back to his shorts, T-shirt and lab coat. He had work to do in the lab, and in preparing a grant he intends to submit to NIH this fall related to exploring the potential protective effect of a certain gene. Asked what he felt about his chances of success, Andrechek gave something of a nervous laugh. If he is turned down, he’ll try again, with a revised proposal, submitted to a different funding source, Andrechek said.

“I’m always optimistic,” he said. “You have to be. And I’m excited about the science. But, at the same time, I am realistic.”

Link: https://www.msu.edu/~andrech1