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EDITORIAL

The Comfort Zone

We're all looking for it—security, predictability, comfort—in pursuing our careers. That's what scientists had in the good old days, when they were comfortable enough to be able to concentrate on the future outcome of their endeavors. It has been repeatedly demonstrated that such an environment produced enormous dividends for the United States and the world.

Today, however, many if not most scientists are not at all comfortable. Instead of looking into the future, they are forced to look over their shoulders to see if they will survive the next round of funding decisions. Members of the science community have come to realize that the continuation of even a modest level of comfort in science is by no means guaranteed, and many scientists (if somewhat begrudgingly) now understand that public advocacy is the route that must be taken to ensure the continued conduct of world-class U.S. science. Recent guest editorials and letters to the editor in *Science* have revealed different approaches to advocacy, reflecting some ambivalence on this topic among the concerned members of the science community. Such discussion and debate are timely, because collectively we're all seeking a comfort zone for advocacy.

My contribution to this debate is to remind us that although one size of advocacy does not fit all, there is something for every scientist to do; that we all must be committed for the long haul; and that for most scientists the comfort zone is located close to home, not in Washington, D.C. Lobbying work in Washington is absolutely essential for the future of science; and every scientist should be contributing, through his or her professional associations, to responsible representation of the interests of science in the nation's capital. Scientists should also be receptive to calls from their societies' leaders for action in support of specific legislation. But Washington-based lobbying is not enough. There is a crying need for thousands of scientists to participate locally in public outreach and advocacy activities that will reinforce every community's commitment to the production of public goods—which is another way of describing the work of science.

There are many ways for a scientist to become involved in the local community—through visits to schools or guest lectures at civic clubs, churches, and senior centers, for example. Ultimately, every scientist should be able to answer “yes” to what I call the “7-11 test”: Do your community leaders recognize you by sight and know your issues when you see each other in the local convenience store? Do the editor of the local newspaper, the producer of local television news, a city council member, a religious leader, and your member of Congress know you? By “know you and your issues” I mean have you explained to these community leaders what science is contributing to their community in terms of good jobs and as a source of civic pride, in terms of returning federal dollars to their congressional district, and in terms of how the scientific work you do is important to their quality of life and that of their children and grandchildren?

When even 10 percent of the members of the science community can pass the “7-11 test,” we will have come a long way toward comfort with advocacy, as well as a long way toward increased support of science. When we're close to 100 percent and every scientist is engaged in some form of public advocacy, science will once again be confidently looking into the future, and it will be a bright future for the nation. One hundred percent is the right long-term goal, because there is indeed a comfort zone of advocacy for every scientist and a comfort zone of respect for advocacy on the part of every scientist. The sooner the scientific community sets its sights on achieving these goals, the better for science and for the nation. I urge every member of that community to commit to public outreach and find a way to get involved—make school visits, submit guest articles, call in to radio talk shows, write letters to the editor, attend town meetings. Advocacy isn't somebody else's job anymore, it isn't all happening in Washington, and it doesn't need to be uncomfortable.

Mary Woolley

The author is president of Research!America in Alexandria, VA.