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## Alternative Careers in Science: Interview with Mount Sinai Postdoc Alumnus, Dr. Ryan J. Cummings, PhD

By Agata Kurowski

Dr. Ryan J. Cummings, PhD is a scientist in the field of immuno-oncology at the company MedImmune. MedImmune is the global biologics research and development arm of Astra-Zeneca with centers in Gaithersburg, MD, Mountain View, CA, and Cambridge, UK. Globally, it employs about 2,500 people. Ryan sat down with us to give us some insights about his position.

*What graduate degree(s) have you received?* Ph.D.

*What city and state do you work in?*

Gaithersburg, Maryland – the corporate headquarters of MedImmune.

*Did you have any jobs between this one and your postdoc?* No

*Can you give us a brief description of your current position?*

As a scientist in immuno-oncology, I spend equal time at the bench and the desk. I design, plan, initiate, and execute preclinical scientific R&D for multiple projects; however, most of my time/effort is spent on a primary study which was determined with my manager while drafting yearly goals. Based on my scientific background, I also collaborate across departments to assist other teams with experimental design and/or assays where I have technical expertise.

*What do you wish you had known before accepting your current position?*

I honestly can't think of anything specific as I was fairly prepared to enter the work force. I spoke with several colleagues in biotech/industry to get their input prior to applying for jobs and then asked pertinent questions during each interview to gain perspective about the position/company. Some of these questions included: titles/responsibilities, freedom to explore science, salary/benefits, promotions, work-life balance, expectations, etc.

*What, if anything, do you miss about being a postdoc?*

Although I don't miss 'being' a postdoc, I do really miss the people at Sinai including all the members of my lab, the Postdoc Executive Committee crew, faculty, staff, and all the great postdoc pals I made while working on exciting science. It was a period in my career during which I experienced tremendous growth as a scientist and for that, I am extremely grateful. Life as a postdoc was challenging and quite demanding, but it absolutely prepared me for the next step in my career. In my opinion, the goal of the postdoctoral experience is to find your niche in science and carve out a path that sets you apart from the rest of the applicant pool looking to land a job. You must make time to step away from the bench and explore as many vocations as possible so that you can find a job that fits your skill set and makes you happy.

*What did you learn during your PhD/postdoc that is most helpful to you in your current position?*

How to think creatively, collaborate, adapt my scientific niche across a broader scope, give good seminars, and write.

*What was the most important event or factor that contributed to your transition into an alternative career outside academia?*

My postdoc. I was uncertain what I wanted to do after graduate school as I remained interested in academia, biotech/industry, and politics. Fortunately, I was able to get a taste of all of these during my postdoc but I don't think my decision to enter biotech, or any career choice for that matter, was an 'alternative' to academia as if that is the norm. The beauty of a postdoc is that you have the flexibility to explore all career options (and you should) because the training we receive is valued across a variety of disciplines.

*How many hours a week do you spend in meetings?*

It can vary but no more than I did during my postdoc. Everyone is busy and everyone has calendars to keep so meetings both start and end promptly.



Dr. Ryan Cummings, PhD

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**Approximately how many hours do you work per week?**

MedImmune and AstraZeneca strongly believe in a healthy work/life balance which makes working there really enjoyable. Life sciences are not 'clock in/clock out' so I do what is necessary to finish my experiments.

**How frequently do you work in the evenings and/or on the weekends?**

I am not required or expected to work in the evenings or on weekends.

**On a scale of 1-10 (1=low, 10=high), how much autonomy do you have in your current position?** 8

**Does your position require that you travel?**

It does not.

**Do you work with other people and/or in a team? If so, please describe the circumstances and structure of your group work.**

I do work with other people and I am part of other teams via collaboration. Similar to academia, I have a manager and we have regular lab meetings.

**How did you learn to do your job?**

Desk and bench work I learned during grad school/postdoc but the industry/biotech terminology I learned on the fly.

**Is a PhD necessary to apply for this type of positions?**

To enter as a Scientist a PhD is required.

**Was your publication record important towards getting this position?**

In my opinion, it is always important to have publications as it demonstrates productivity but there are many other factors involved in the hiring process. I think if you offer something unique to the company, be it a technique or area of expertise, and can work well with others you will set yourself apart from other applicants.

**Is it valued to have a PhD in your current position?** Yes

**Is it valued to have completed a postdoc in your current position?** Yes

**Did your PhD/postdoc research focus matter to get this position?** Yes



## Co-Chair Corner



Hello fellow postdocs,

It seems that the infamous NYC summer has finally arrived. To help you deal with the heat wave, we have some refreshing news for all you. First, the updated "Postdoc Handbook" has been finalized and is now available for consultation on the Office of Postdoctoral Affairs website: <http://icahn.mssm.edu/files/ISMMS/Assets/Files/PostdocHandbook.pdf>. It contains valuable policies and information including salary, vacation days, leave of absence, and teaching policies, and it summarizes services and resources offered by the Icahn School of Medicine (ISMMS) and Mount Sinai in general. Please, take a look to be aware of all our rights and dues as postdocs!

To improve programs and work life for postdocs at ISMMS, your opinion is fundamental so please fill out the anonymous **2017 Annual Postdoc Survey** developed by the

Postdoc Executive Committee (PEC) (<https://www.survey-monkey.com/r/PYH5TY6>). It covers a wide range of different topics including salary, housing, mentorship, and professional development. The information will be used by the PEC and Mount Sinai leadership to advocate and implement necessary changes. The PEC's achievements were recognized by the National Postdoc Association (NPA); you can read the **interview with previous PEC co-chairs, Dr. Delaine Ceholski and Dr. Alison Sanders** in the NPA May newsletter ([http://www.nationalpostdoc.org/page/postdocket\\_05175](http://www.nationalpostdoc.org/page/postdocket_05175)).

If you are pondering the next step in your scientific career, you may be interested in the "Principal Investigator Discussion Series and Reception" talk series recently created by the PEC and the Office of Career Services & Strategy. The series invites investigators from the Mount Sinai community to discuss their career progression, the decisions they took along the way, and the challenges they currently face. The first event will take place on June 21st at 5pm in Annenberg Bldg 25-51. Assistant Professor Nicole C. Dubois and Senior Faculty Florence Marlow will offer their insight and share their experiences in pursuing an academic career. Beverages will be served.

Save the date also for another major career-related event that will take place on Friday June 30th in the Goldwurm Auditorium from 4 to 5 pm. The PEC and Mount Sinai Biotech will host the "NY Biotech: Make it here" where life sciences experts who made it in the Biotech scene in New York share the highs and lows of their endeavors outside academia. The panel consists of Yana Zorina, PhD (Senior Scientist, MSKCC and Co-founder, KiiLN), Sam Globu, PhD (Director of Scientific Operations, Celmatix), Anthony Bartotti, PhD (Principal Scientist, Kadmon), Brian Gillette, PhD (Founder and CEO, Ardent Cell Technologies), and Bridget Osetinsky, PhD (Founder and CEO, Hyperfine). If you plan to attend, please RSVP to Luis Santos ([luis.santos@mssm.edu](mailto:luis.santos@mssm.edu)). Our **monthly Postdoc Social** will immediately follow this event and it will take place in Central Park, at the East Meadow (5th Avenue/98th street). Come and enjoy food and beverages!

Finally, the PEC thinks that creating a sense of community is a key ingredient for the well-being of postdocs. In this regard, we are actively supporting the **Trainee Health And Wellness (THAW)** initiative that is establishing informal peer-to-peer mentorship among trainees (postdocs and graduate students) to build relationships and communities. Sometimes life as postdoc can be challenging, as we juggle our personal lives in a demanding city and the many obstacles that academia can put on our path. This "buddy-system" mentorship framework aims to address immediate- and short-term needs for informal connection and interactions among postdocs; if you wish to participate by becoming a mentor to a senior graduate student, a peer mentor to fellow postdocs, or if you wish to be mentored by a current postdoc, complete the following survey: <https://goo.gl/forms/MoUIhP9EBCzaMhG12>. For any questions about this initiative, please contact Patricia Thibault ([patricia.thibault@mssm.edu](mailto:patricia.thibault@mssm.edu)).

Happy summer everyone!

Nicholas and Catarina are your PEC co-chairs

# You make your own luck

By Ben Shackleton

Picture the scenario:

You pull up to a deserted T-junction in your brand new Mini Cooper. After a cursory glance in each direction, you slowly ease into the middle of the junction. Suddenly the glint of another car's windshield enters your peripheral vision. There's a screech of tortured rubber but it's too late. Time goes into slow motion as the two vehicles approach at what seems a glacial speed. Everything goes black. When you open your eyes again, the world is full of twisted metal. Your head feels like the morning after a heavy night with Orson Welles and there's smoke rising from under the hood. You're battered and bruised, but alive. What's the first thing that goes through your head?

1. I'm fortunate to be alive!
2. I can't believe I was hit. Typical.
3. That never going to buff out.

This scenario is a simple assessment of a person's perception of how lucky they are. If number 1 was your choice, you probably consider yourself lucky. Whereas if number 2 was your answer, you're probably at the other end of the spectrum and consider yourself unlucky. As it turns out, your perception of how lucky you are can impact your general satisfaction with life. By the way, if number 3 was your choice, I'll give you the benefit of the doubt and put that down to a concussion.

A couple of years ago, the mentalist and illusionist Derren Brown televised an experiment investigating the perception of luck. They identified one self-professed unlucky individual and unbeknownst to him, put him through a battery of tests. In the first, they planted a scratch card that would have won him a TV, which he promptly threw away. He then missed the chance to win £25 from a questionnaire, which he could have answered in his sleep, and then walked straight past a £50 note they placed on the sidewalk in front of him. In one final attempt, he was put in a situation where if he helped a stranger with a flat tire, it would have led to a 'chance' meeting with a famous comedian, which he passed on. In contrast, a self-professed lucky person, who happened to be the local pub owner, stopped to help and was rewarded with a standup comedy session at her bar resulting in a packed house and presumably a good night for the bank balance.

While this is only anecdotal, there is evidence to suggest that the perception of luck may have wide ranging impacts on people's lives. Research from the University of Hertfordshire suggests that people who consider themselves lucky are more outgoing and open to new experiences. They also tend to see the bright side of bad encounters. Additionally, studies from the University of Leicester found that the belief in being lucky is positively correlated with optimism and has a negative relationship with depression and anxiety. Moreover, they are more likely to persist at challenging tasks. As a result of all these characteristics, they often seize more opportunities that are thrown their way. In addition, if everything does go pear shaped, they are more likely to simply brush it off.

Similar effects have been seen with people that have lucky objects, whether it be a ring or even an item of clothing. For example, it has been reported that Michael Jordan wore his lucky University of North Carolina shorts under his Chicago Bulls uniform throughout the course of his incredibly successful career. Whether this had any effect is obviously up for debate but there is some evidence to suggest that having an item which you believe to be lucky may improve performance in difficult tasks. Interestingly, this means that simply increasing the accessibility to luck-related concepts by, for example, giving someone an item that they've been told is lucky, could potentially reduce the perception of risk and induce a positive effect. So, if someone offers you a lucky trinket, just take it.



<http://theconversation.com/explainer-does-luck-exist-513>

In the end, it seems that the very belief in luck may be a self-fulfilling prophesy. If you think you'll be lucky and surround yourself with lucky items, some of that might just rub off. So basically, you make your own luck.

## Ways to keep in touch

- Our website: <http://icahn.mssm.edu/education/postdoctoral-training>
- Follow our Twitter account: [@MtSinaiPostdocs](https://twitter.com/MtSinaiPostdocs)
- Join our Facebook page: [“ISMMS Postdoc Executive Committee”](https://www.facebook.com/ISMMS-Postdoc-Executive-Committee/)
- Follow us on LinkedIn: [Mount Sinai Postdocs and Postdoc Alumni](https://www.linkedin.com/company/mount-sinai-postdocs-and-postdoc-alumni/)
- Trainee Mistreatment Resource Panel: <http://web-commons.mssm.edu/mistreatmentresourcepanel/>

## The Mount Sinai Postdoc Periodical

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