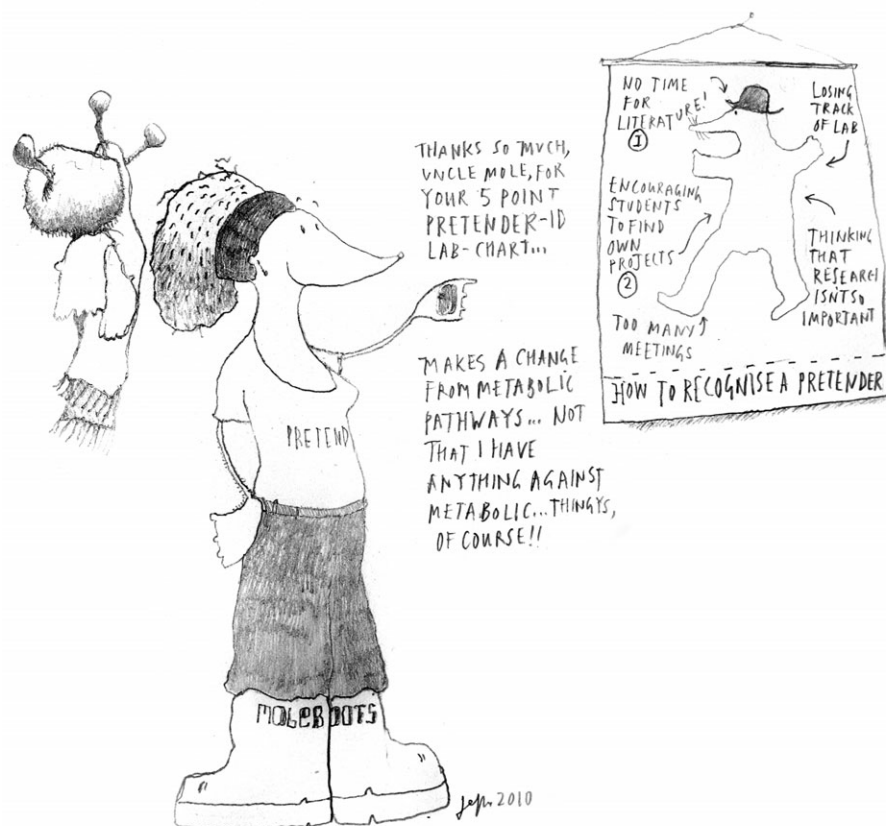


An occasional column, in which Mole and other characters share their views on various aspects of life-science research. Messages for Mole can be sent to mole@biologists.com.

Any correspondence may be published in forthcoming issues.



The pretender

Dear Uncle Mole,

It is cold out there! What happened to our rather balmy winters, at least by comparison? I wear so many layers on my mad dash to the lab one would think this was Siberia or Antarctica or at very least Finland. It's almost enough to make a mole-let march down to the geology department and demand a retraction from the global warming crowd. But, I digress – I'm safe at work now, divested of my hat and gloves and muff, and excited to be moving ahead with some of my projects. The only thing that still troubles me is this business of hot-and-cold. And not outside, mind you: in the department. As I take my first few steps on the career ladder (and oooh, how exciting that is), I'm also a wee bit perplexed about a conundrum that has taken me a few years in science to notice. A mole-let trying to finish a thesis keeps her head down, but a mole-let who wants to go places starts looking up. And what I've discovered is that in the grand and glorious world of academia, all who glitter are not gold. Sometimes it's gilding that sparkles just long enough to mask the rather ugly surface that lies beneath. I call such a character The Pretender. But with apologies to Jackson Browne (it was a great song, after all), what does one do about them?

I suppose the first task is to identify the problem. In the beginning, I wasn't even aware

such individuals existed. When you're young and small and starry-eyed about science, it's easy to assume – because why would anyone think otherwise? – that a smile is a smile and enthusiasm is enthusiasm. After all, embracing the life of a graduate student defines one as equal parts nerd and naive. Politics is for politicians, and only the purest of thoughts and motives belong in the lab. Oh how quickly that glow fades! In fact, it's rather entertaining to look back at it now: there might well be more politics in academia than Whitehall and Washington combined. And, much like the lobbyists who so bedevil our American colleagues, the science world has The Pretenders.

How can you spot one? Well, for starters a Pretender is usually someone in the relatively early stages of his or her career. No matter how slick an operator one might be, the odds of bluffing one's way into the Dean's office or a Department Head's chair are about the same as this Molette getting a call from Stockholm: unlikely in the extreme. A Pretender might have secret ambitions of grandeur, but she is most often found amidst the pool of junior faculty who want to upgrade business cards from Assistant to Associate Professor. Just like the hardworking and dedicated scientists who make a life in academia so much fun, The Pretender is also constantly loitering about the lab. The difference is she never seems to *do* anything. Oh she talks

a good story, and no mistake about that, but if you listen carefully to what a Pretender says, it becomes clear she is doing exactly that: pretending to have both knowledge and skills that, in reality, are nothing but smoke and mirrors. There are few things more vexing than being a young scientist still in training and watching someone who doesn't know the first thing about establishing the right controls or trouble-shooting a complex experiment nonetheless begin acting like she's the next big thing... and get results from the paradox.

I used to wonder how a Pretender pulled this off, but then I was reminded of a simple truth by my good friend Vole (what would I do without him?). "Hyper-orbicularis oris," he said one day, as we watched our Department's best Pretender sashay down the hall towards an office that is a total waste of space. "Hyper-orbicularis oris." The Latin threw me for the brief moment it took to recall this was the name of a muscle (the sphincter muscle that encircles the mouth, in fact), not a microorganism, but once I made the connection, I realized two very important things. First, it is possible to say anything in a way that is fit for polite company. And second, Vole was right. Just like the first grade, kissing up to the right people in science can really pay off.

That's what worries me about The Pretenders, Uncle Mole. Sure it's therapeutic to vent about a situation we all find more than a little aggravating – and thanks for humouring me on this one – but there's a bigger problem from the perspective of someone in my shoes. How does the mole-let who just wants to do good science avoid getting entangled with someone who is all show and no substance? After all, in the world of academic publishing where every last manuscript counts, Pretenders need to ride the coattails of someone who does know how to secure grant funding while also attracting the interest of junior scientists who know which end of the Pipetman is up. I am horrified to admit that I came very close myself to becoming trapped in just such a dead-end situation. I look back at it now and realize I should have seen the bluffing for what it was, but I'll admit it: I was fooled for a time by the packaging. Luckily I wasn't in so deep I couldn't extricate myself. Sure there's a publication on my CV that will always make my eyes roll, but I think in the end it is a good thing that your naive little Molette is now a bit more savvy in the ways of the world.

What have I learned? Well, first of all, let a potential colleague or mentor's actions speak louder than their words. No matter how smooth the spiel, does PubMed back them up? Do they publish independent work in that most important position: first or last author? It's one thing to have a CV full of publications, but if a

little forensic analysis shows all or most are reviews with a *real* scientist or fifth-author papers, that's a good tell for a hand that is all bluff. The same applies to grant funding, and it's not that hard to investigate such details, thanks to the wonders of Google. Does a potential mentor have his or her own grants that are sustainable for more than a flash-in-the-pan year or two? A good Pretender can ride the wave of short-term funding on potential for some time. However, without tangible results and substance to support the ambition, the money dries up eventually. Finally, what is an individual's track record in working with colleagues? Are there any long-term relationships in the lab, or do people join only to leave a short time later? Research is a small enough world that etiquette often keeps people from revealing their true reasons for leaving a particular lab. But, if the senior technicians and post-docs who make a lab tick can't bear to stay in the orbit of the next big star, well, that might be a sign the star is of the falling and not shooting variety.

Ultimately, whether I like it or not, I am realising that mastering the politics of academia is as important of a skill in the repertoire of a successful scientist as grant writing or western blotting. I don't have to bluff my way through every hand – I can be the same bubbly and *real* Molette I was when I started this journey – but I do have to learn how to play the game. If anything, my recent close call with a Pretender has only made me appreciate anew the scientific friends and mentors who have always been nothing but themselves. So here's to you, Uncle Mole, and to Vole and to many others I've met along the way. If we scientists were ever to look to our humanities friends for a motto that transcends the divide between science and the arts, then I propose a toast to Sir Shakespeare himself. "Above all, to thine own self be true!" It works... – in life, in love *and* in the lab. What do you think, Uncle Mole? Shall we raise a glass? Until next time,
Molette

My dear Molette,

As always, I'm absolutely delighted to hear from you. Sorry about the weather (me, I'm hunkered down in my Mole hole with a little bit of something to take the chill off), but I think you've actually hit on a rather intriguing analogy here.

You see, while the lunatic fringe is decrying the overwhelming evidence for global warming in the face of a few weeks of cold weather (I know you were joking about this, but they are not), the fact is that such unusual weather patterns are exactly what we expect from global climate change. Superficial data can appear to trump hard won, solid information. Such may apply to your 'Pretenders', as well. But we should have a look

at how they got their positions in the first place and see if we might be a bit more forgiving.

Once upon a time, your Pretender must have shown some promise: a few nice publications, a grant, or even two. Confidence increased, and maybe this individual was (for a short time) a bit of a favourite. At the very least, those in positions of authority (the 'kissees') were willing to give the benefit of the doubt.

But life, as you know, has a way of weighing in on our best-laid plans. Committee meetings, teaching, institutional activities – all seem to be in the spirit of faculty cooperation, but ultimately do nothing for our professional development as researchers (okay, not strictly true – teaching can be extremely effective, provided it is done well). Family, social pressure, other interests, and enthusiastic dispersal of energy into areas that do nothing for our science is, at first, rather refreshing, but in time we turn into Pretenders: keeping up the confident attitude but not the scientific acumen that goes with it.

Spotting the Pretender, as you say, is important if one is to avoid disastrous collaborations and other black holes. But not becoming one is also of paramount importance. Here are the warning signs:

- (1) "I just don't have any time to read the literature any more."
- (2) "I like to encourage my graduate students to come up with their own projects."
- (3) "I would write more papers if I didn't have so many committee meetings."
- (4) "We have exciting results, but so many projects that it is hard to know where any of them are going."
- (5) "There're a lot of more important things than doing research."

Okay, about that last one: of course for the vast majority of the population, this is absolutely true. But if you are a scientist, and not a Pretender, then doing science has to be just about your favourite thing to do (give or take). If not, what are you doing this for? The money?

As for the Pretenders out there, I don't really care that much about them. I like to think that at least some of them will wake up, find something that excites them, and dive passionately into a new line of study. Pretenders no more. If not, we don't have to put up with them for long – as you point out, this is not an evolutionarily stable strategy for a research career.

Yes, Molette, lets raise a glass. Oh, I see I already have one (helps to keep the bitter winds at bay, which may be an excellent reason to love bitter winds)! Until next time.

Love,
Uncle Mole

Molette