A Day in the Life of Dr. Bean and How the NIH Is Wasting $20 Billion per Year

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Interviewer: Good morning, Dr. Bean. Thank you for accepting this opportunity to be interviewed. Your comments will be very useful for the new generation of young and upcoming scientists. Given your very successful career, you likely have much to say and lots of advice to give. My objective this morning is to describe one of your typical days. I am sure it will be fun. Should we start?

Dr. Bean: Yes, my pleasure. Please go ahead.

Interviewer: My interview will be broken into blocks of 2 hours. So, let us start with the first 2 hours of your day.

Dr. Bean: Sure, I get up at 6 AM. I first make coffee and eat my breakfast, which brings me to 6:30 AM; then I do my exercise on a treadmill I have at home, finishing at 7:30 AM. You see, at 62, I must do this, otherwise, who knows what might happen. Then, I walk to work and open my office at exactly 8 AM.

Interviewer: Sounds great. I guess at this time you are well-rested, relaxed, and ready to go.

Dr. Bean: Absolutely! This is the premium time of my day from 8 to 10 AM. And I have strict instructions to my secretary—never book any appointments in this time block. I want this time for myself, for the most challenging part of my job.

Interviewer: And what is that?

Dr. Bean: Writing grants. You see, now I am working on a rather large NIH grant that is worth $2 million over 5 years. If I get it, it will guarantee about 40% of the lab’s budget for a long time.

Interviewer: And the 2 PM block is now ready?

Dr. Bean: Yes, 12 months per year. There is no such a thing as I finished a grant; you finish one and you start a new one; it is a continuous, nonstop exercise.

Interviewer: Wow! I did not know that. How many grants are you submitting per year?

Dr. Bean: About 20.

Interviewer: This sounds totally insane—do you need so much money? What is your success rate?

Dr. Bean: Same as everybody else’s. About a 5% success rate; we send in 20 and we would be lucky if we get one; and I need at least 3 active grants to cover my lab’s expenses.

Interviewer: And what do you do with the grants that are not funded?

Dr. Bean: Same as everybody else. We throw them in a blue plastic bin, otherwise known as the recycle bin.

Interviewer: How much are you making per hour?
Dr. Bean: About $100, and for 4 hours per day doing this, it is worth $400 per day, or roughly, $100,000 per annum.

Interviewer: Going to garbage?
Dr. Bean: Well, sort of.
Interviewer: And how many Dr. Beans are doing this in the USA alone?
Dr. Bean: Well, I do not know exactly but Google says that about 100,000 grant applications are submitted in the USA alone every year, so there must be at least 100,000 applicants like me!

Interviewer: And if I multiply 100,000 by 100,000 do I get 10 billion dollars in wasted wages every year?
Dr. Bean: Damn right! And you have not calculated the time wasted for panel members to review the grants, the administrative costs, etc.; the likely wasted wages may well be 20 billion instead or about 70% of the whole NIH budget!

Interviewer: You seem to be very expensive and very wasteful, Dr. Bean; do the NIH officials know that?
Dr. Bean: I do not know, ask them!
Interviewer: And what do you advise the young scientists?
Dr. Bean: I do not know—perhaps not printing their grants? Dispose of them electronically? But . . . wait a second here; I see that a new e-mail from NIH just arrived, and it reads: “we are pleased to inform you . . .” WHOA! My latest grant has been approved! I am sorry but I have to leave immediately to go and buy the champagne for the celebration with my lab and then leave for a 1-week vacation. I fully deserve it. I made it to the 5% of lucky applicants. See you in 1 week. I am coming back fresh to work on my next grant application.

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