



*I like my job very much, but it's not the whole world for me. I devote a lot of time to my family and to sports: I practice judo, which I got my daughter involved in as well (she even competes). Aside from this I swim, and our whole family goes roller-skating, ice-skating, and biking. I spend a lot of time with my friends. Many of them I have known since the wonderful days of university, when I lived in a dormitory for families*

## Keeping Up the Pace

**Academia:** Was a scientific career something you always had planned?

**Doctor Krystyna Dąbrowska:** *It took me a while to arrive at this decision. At one time I was convinced that I would become an artist, and I even went to an artistic high school. When graduating from school, I still had a great number of ideas for the future: Egyptology, psychology... Ultimately an interest in nature won out, and I began to study environmental protection at Wrocław University. There I got to know the laboratories at the Microbiology Institute, took an interest in genetics, and I arrived at the decision to switch my major to biology and to specialize in microbiology. And that's the way things stayed. In the*

*end this intrigued me so much that I wanted to expand my knowledge. Because I was anxious to take doctorate studies, I applied to be accepted to the Institute of Immunology and Experimental Therapy of the Polish Academy of Sciences. This was not easy, because my university year was quite numerous and there was considerable competition.*

**Did many of your fellow female students choose a scientific career?**

*Quite a few of them. Among those who graduated with a specialization in microbiology, it probably was most of them.*

**Why do certain specializations enjoy greater interest among women, others among men?**

*I think that "classical" nature-related interests are dominant among women. In the case of my field, microbiology, one has to have a lot of manual dexterity and patience, because tiresome work of this sort is frequently necessary. And men seem to prefer work that requires less manual effort... Although I would not by any means like to say that male microbiologists can't manage it well, because those who have chosen this type of scientific work do manage excellently. Notions that there are male or female predispositions are, for me, a symptom of getting bogged down in stereotypes. Every person should be judged individually - for the benefit not only of women and men, but also for the benefit of science.*

**Are there differences in the proportions of women and men at your Institute?**

*In general women prevail, although this depends on the research team, and somewhat on the academic level. There's no use hiding that there are definitely more male professors, while women are in the majority among laboratory technicians. This reflects the fact that with time women slow down their pace.*

**Perhaps this is evidence of some sort of barrier, some sort of complications in developing their career?**

*I think that this is not some sort of complications, but rather a matter that plays out on the level of the strategic lifetime decisions made by women and men. I have a very optimistic assessment of equal treatment for women. In my experience, within the scientific community women are treated very seriously and fairly. If any manifestations of discrimination do occur, they are sporadic and at most reflect certain general stereotypes that function in society, such as, for example, the male opinion about women drivers. If some sort of pressure is exerted on women, it is not at all in the workplace, but rather by the family at home. Women usually have greater family duties. This is not a negative selection for scientific work; rather I would say that this is a lasting trend. Some of my female colleagues gave up dynamic careers, or gave up working at all, specifically for family reasons. It is hard to say whether social acceptance for women who choose to pursue scientific work is greater than, for example, in the case of businesswomen. This is a highly individualized matter. Frequently one can encounter, within the same circle of people, individuals who profess extreme views on this topic.*

**And so, are there as many women in science as there should be, as many as there could be?**

*It seems to me that they are as present as is possible under the given econo-*

*mic and social conditions. This is a derivative of many factors - including tradition, which perhaps somewhat limits the number of working women, and on the other hand the "spirit of progress" and trends for women to get involved in professional activity.*

**For you, the mother of a young daughter, is scientific activity a good type of work? Is it conducive to family life?**

*Scientific work is not particularly privileged with respect to the other professions; it occupies one's time and one has to reckon with that. It does not introduce any particular simplifications or complications. Like any profession, it requires good organization and a well-considered daily schedule. In science there is no way out like there is, for example, in big corporations, and if one does not work hard it is tough to expect results. Treating science like a hobby might bring results only in exceptional cases. In general, one has to work a lot, and intensely. I was lucky that my daughter was born while I was still at university. When I was beginning my doctorate, my daughter was already starting preschool. This is quite a comfortable arrangement for a mother, because leaving home or going to work no longer pose a big problem. There is a prevalent conviction that if a girl gives birth to a child at university, she will probably never graduate. But I think that the tables have now turned. Now it is harder to rear a child and work than to do so and study. My daughter gained a lot from the fact that her mother was a student. I benefited from greater flexibility in my daily schedule, the ability to do many things at home, long vacation periods, and the ability to pass certain subjects extramurally. Thanks to this I was able to spend a lot more time with my child than if I had tried to work a job.*

**You have won a competition for women who work in science. Are such competitions and programs (such as those of the European Union) that promote the pre-**



***I believe that people can put their lives together successfully through hard work, a bit of good luck, and a positive attitude***

**sence of women in the scientific community of any significance?**

*This definitely serves as encouragement for all women, and as a kind of education or promotion. An indication that deciding upon this sort of work will be well-received, that one will be given support and appreciated. This could somewhat increase women's mobilization and determination to try to reconcile household and scientific duties.*

**Does the mindset of male scientists need to be changed?**

*Not really. It seems to me that things are quite good here.*

Interviewed by  
**Piotr Kossobudzki**  
Warsaw, March 2005

#### **DR KRYSZYNA DĄBROWSKA**

works at the PAN Institute of Immunology and Experimental Therapy in Wrocław. She studies bacteriophages - viruses that attack bacteria - testing the hypothesis that they might also be used to slow the development of human tumors. In 2004 she won a stipend from UNESCO and L'Oréal under the "For Women in Science" Program. She and her husband are raising their 8-year-old daughter Weronika.